CORONET

GIL HOGG

A SMELL OF FRAUD

ACTION AND SUSPENSE BEHIND THE CLOSED DOORS OF BIG BUSINESS

A SMELL OF FRAUD

Steve Macy collapsed in the shadow of the fence. He couldn't have run or walked another step. He dabbed at his bleeding hands with a handkerchief.

It was an agony to raise his ankle so he could examine the teeth marks, and staunch the flow of blood.

Planes blasted across the runway in front of him, riffling his hair with their kerosene-soaked wind.

He wiped his hands over his wet face, and then wiped them on what was left of his suit. He fished out a battered pack of cigarettes, and lit one.

He was sitting in one of the most God-awful places imaginable, and he was in very, very bad shape, but that cigarette was the greatest he ever smoked.

A Smell of Fraud

Gil Hogg

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PART ONE
THE MARCH REPORT

1

Hong Kong

The air traffic controller could see nothing from the windows of the control tower when the summer storm burst over Kai Tak airport. The parched runways steamed. Warm rain beat the high, tinted windows through a dense mist.

He finished noting the latest reports received from his four observation posts: they were his eyes, two on the hills which cupped the terminal buildings, and two boat stations set to observe the far part of the runway which projected out into the harbour.

The controller fixed the reports on to a clipboard near his microphone, and tapped the board confidently. 'It's a localized cloudburst. No more than a two-mile radius. Should be over in twenty minutes.'

The controller's assistant nodded absently. He was watching the clock, and listening intently, a headset clamped over his ears. 'Here's 312 ... at ten miles.'

The computerized schedule of aircraft changed soundlessly. At this time on Saturday morning a plane was landing or taking off every three minutes. The controller concentrated on the bank of instruments before him, the lights and buttons and screens and dials which were now his only connection with the huge and fragile craft waiting on the ground for his clearance, or in the air, hurtling towards him. He touched a switch.

'Control to 312 ...' There was a crackle of acknowledgement from the distant plane. 'We have storm conditions here for two miles. Approach visibility zero. Runway visibility 100 feet. I have you at ten miles, bearing 320....'

The controller's assistant was watching the radar screen. '540 is at two miles.'

The controller's attention turned automatically to Flight 540, a Libra Boeing 727 from Delhi. Flight 540 had been cleared to land at five miles. The captain knew the weather

conditions. He did not want to divert or delay. The captain got a bonus for saving fuel and keeping to schedule; and he was flying a craft capable of landing in conditions of zero visibility. The controller screwed up his eyes to peer beyond the windows, but he was shut in by the grey maelstrom which swirled outside without any sign of weakening. 'Approach lights on,' he muttered.

'Lights on,' his assistant responded. 'It's exactly eleven o'clock. He's a couple of minutes early.'

The controller had returned to the radar screen. There was the tiny gold dot of the approaching plane, and the needle lines of the glidescope, which the dot had to follow to bring the blind aircraft to the landing point on the runway.

'Control to 540....' The controller received no answer. But he did not necessarily expect one. He knew he could be heard, and he knew that the pilots and engineers, however experienced, would be tense over their instruments. He went on unperturbed: 'I have you on glidescope. A little low. I say low, 100 feet. You require heading correction. Correct heading five degrees left.'

'He's heading okay now,' the assistant said. 'But he's still low, lower than he was....'

'He's flying it, not me,' the controller replied. 'He's got every aid in the world.'

'He's off the glidepath,' the assistant said, as the bright dot sagged out of the pattern of converging lines on the screen. 'One and a half miles.'

'Control to 540. Do you hear me? How do you hear me, 540?' The controller's voice was firmer.

'He hasn't corrected.'

The controller frowned at the screen; it was patterned with bright dashes. The storm was interfering, but the gold dot of the approaching Boeing was there, fading and flickering, but there. 'I wonder if they're getting interference,' he said almost to himself. The screen was fading. He measured the distance between the glidepath and the dot of the plane. The decision came without hesitation.

'Hullo 540, hullo 540. I have you at one mile. You are too low. I say too low. Apply full power now and make another

circuit. Apply full power now and make another circuit ... do you read me?'

'He's gone,' the assistant said. The screen dissolved into a blur of moving dots of light.

'Hullo 540. Control to 540. I have lost you. I have lost contact with you on my instruments. Make another circuit. Repeat circuit and acknowledge.'

The controller remained fixed concentratedly on the screen. His steady fingers tried the adjustments. The blur remained. He looked down at his wristwatch. The second hand swept over ten, twenty, thirty seconds. 'Can you hear him?' he said.

By then the Boeing should have been pouring out the rage from its three engine pods on to the runway, and just enough of the noise would have seeped into the sound-proofed tower for the controller to know it had arrived.

'No,' the assistant said, paler than usual. 'I haven't heard anything. He should have been overhead if he was going round again....'

'He might have pulled away very sharply,' the controller mused. 'Or he might have gone in——'

'Into the harbour? Oh my God, no!'

'Sound a red alert.'

The assistant reached out to a row of four red levers and pulled each one down. They could hear the distant wail of sirens.

'Warn Flight 312 off. Hold him on circuit at 5,000 feet,' the controller said and brought his microphone close to his mouth. 'Control to all stations. Red alert. All stations, red alert. Contact with approaching flight 540 lost at one mile. Nothing further heard from this flight. Flight 540 may have diverted at one mile or crashed in harbour. Boat stations to report first.... Calling Seaboy One, Seaboy One to report....'

The controller eased back in his chair to await the reports. In the cool air-conditioned tower, the sweat that had broken out on his forehead suddenly felt cold. He wiped his face with a handkerchief, and broke a long-standing rule by lighting a cigarette before noon. The inhalation of smoke relaxed him.

'Seaboy One calling....'

'Roger, Seaboy One.'

'Seaboy One proceeding due north through sector 1 at ten knots. Visibility fifty yards. Sea choppy. No contact. Nothing heard.'

The assistant let his breath out sharply. The controller drew again on his cigarette.

'Seaboy Two, Seaboy Two——'

The controller and his assistant exchanged a look. They both detected the urgency in the operator's voice.

'... wingtip sighted in harbour 200 yards west of runway, sector 2, approaching now, aircraft submerged, call for crane and rescue boats....'

2

New York

The onyx ashtray, clean and unused, rested alone on a mahogany side table. The ashtray reflected the subdued light of the room in its own rich, yellow green hues. A strong hand hovered over the table and dropped a piece of paper on to the polished surface: a cable, newly delivered.

ORVILLE PRESCOTT
BANTRUST NEW YORK
DEEP REGRET AT THE LOSS OF YOUR REPRESENTATIVE
JOHN MARCH IN HONGKONG AIR DISASTER STOP
PLEASE CONVEY MY PERSONAL SYMPATHY TO RELATIVES
SINCERELY RICHARD WEST

Orville Prescott was not at ease in the deep, tapestry-covered armchair. A lean, healthy, bald man in his fifties, nut-brown from recent holidays, he showed no sign of strain or grief. His eyes moved restlessly behind his glasses. He reached for a telephone, hidden in a recess of the chair, and waited for the sleepy secretary who answered the instrument to speak before he did. Secretaries were always startled to find Orville Prescott requiring their services at seven o'clock on

Sunday night, even though they were paid to stay on duty.

'This cable you brought me about John March.'

Although she had hardly done any work all afternoon, the girl hesitated dully before remembering. 'Yes?'

'Notify next of kin immediately with the usual regrets. Inform them of the cable from Libra. Arrange for a senior executive to visit personally tomorrow. I imagine March has a wife or mother. We should give any immediate financial help which may be needed....'

'Yes, sir. The usual procedure.' The girl was functioning.

Orville Prescott thrust back the receiver and turned to the occupant of the twin chair near his own. 'Does that suit you, my dear?'

His wife nodded approval. 'It's the right thing to do *first* Orville. Now, if you want to worry about what this young man's death means to First Bankers Trust, go ahead.'

Orville Prescott regarded her with a slight smile. A very plain little woman, unused after more than ten years of opportunity to buying her clothes on Fifth Avenue, and having her hair dressed every day. He sometimes wished she was more glamorous. She wore no makeup and still looked like the New England parson's daughter she was.

'Thank you, dear,' he said, and walked to the great window over the East River. He looked out to Brooklyn and Queens, and down Long Island Sound, and to the Bronx. First Bankers had a part of almost all the shipyards, factories and power plants he could see, and he was boss. He might have been twice as rich without Charlotte's restraint. But he might have been broke too, or in jail. She wouldn't have had the slightest idea that he tried hard to meet her standards. She would have been shocked. She thought it came naturally.

Orville Prescott picked up the telephone again. 'Get me Herbert Klein, please.'

'Surely you're not going to disturb Herbert's Sunday night,' Charlotte Prescott said.

'I just want a little game, that's all,' he replied innocently.

'Orville,' his wife said with the knowing smile she reserved mostly for her children, 'you know you want to talk to Herb about Mr March's death.'

'Well,' he allowed, 'I might happen to mention it.'

Herbert Klein lived only a block from the Prescotts. He was a frequent guest on a Sunday night, a friend for more than twenty years. Klein had evident pleasure in entering the apartment. He was attracted particularly by the two Gauguins, treasures that he as a professional rather than a businessman would never be able to afford. Prescott did not kid himself that his family appreciated the pictures. Their golds and browns went with the décor. They were creditable acquisitions, investments. But Klein never failed to look at the paintings with a kind of rapture that had nothing to do with desiring to possess them.

Prescott poured his friend a large brandy and himself a glass of mineral water. 'Shall we have a hand or two, Charlotte?'

Mrs Prescott's eyes were on the television screen which flickered in the corner, the sound turned down. The screen showed a news clip. A harbour, wharves, tugs, rough grey water, launches circling, tossing, and the camera, itself on a launch, heaved. 'It's the crash——'

Prescott bent forward to the volume control.

'Don't turn it up, please,' his wife asked, and he stopped. They all watched. A floating crane hoisted the broken fuselage from the water, the broken windows and gashes spouting like fountains.

'Ghastly,' Charlotte said, switching the set off.

'That was a Libra plane,' Klein said.

'One of Orville's men was killed.'

'John March,' Orville Prescott said. 'Remember who he was?'

'Wasn't he the one you sent to look over the Libra operation?' Klein asked.

'Sure was. Bad luck getting killed in one of their planes. Hardly knew him myself. Good, competent man I believe.'

'It wouldn't have looked well in his report,' Klein said.

'Oh, Herb. . . .'

'Okay, Charlotte. I'm sorry.' Klein changed his tack quickly.

'You don't have a report for the Board tomorrow, then?' he asked Orville Prescott.

'Right. I don't have a complete report. I have some of March's letters and cables. Nothing much in them for or against. He was on his way back. Due here today or tomorrow. If he had anything to say, he'd have said it before now.'

Klein held his hand up. He began to consider the facts. 'You're going to spend fifteen million dollars outright, with a commitment for further instalments totalling a hundred million more within the year. You're going to take a share in the biggest, or what will be the biggest, transport consortium in the Pacific Basin. You'll be a virtual partner with Libra, a sleeping partner except for board representation. It's your first big splash outside the United States. Everything has been checked out, except your financial analyst, making a few last-minute inquiries, fails to make a home run.... I don't know, maybe somebody on the Board will object tomorrow.'

'Object, Herb? What about? Don't give me that extra-cautious lawyer stuff——'

'I thought that was what you paid Herb for?' Charlotte said.

'Maybe it is, maybe it is, but if I waited for a lawyer to say yes before I made any deals, I wouldn't make any deals. Libra has a great record; this guy Harry Beech that runs it has a great record. I don't want to miss out, that's all,' Prescott growled. 'Let's play cards,' he said abruptly.

Charlotte Prescott was sufficiently under Orville's sway to enjoy the unholy practice of playing poker on Sunday night for the vast stake of 100 cents a player. The three played with flippant determination for an hour and a quarter, when Charlotte announced the last hand. Orville Prescott had $2.10 before him, and scented victory. He dealt himself a pair of aces, and sat on them with an eight, looking like a man with three of a kind. Klein sat on three cards and bought two. So did his wife. She laughed and threw her hand in. 'Trying for the impossible,' she said. It was between him and Klein.

Prescott fanned out the cards he had bought. He had another eight. His heart gave a pleasant jump. A pair of aces and a pair of eights: the dead man's hand. Klein was raising him and plunging. There was seventy cents in the centre. He

covered the bet and then pushed another twenty-five in.

Klein was staring at him. Prescott stared back, unwavering. Klein gave his fourth brandy a swirl in the balloon and gulped it. 'I've got the lowest trio on the board. Three twos. It don't make sense to raise a two-card buyer, but I figure I should see you, to keep you honest.' Klein brought his eyes to fix Prescott's glinting blue behind the spectacles. The two fought it out silently for a few seconds. Then Klein was satisfied. 'I don't see why I should waste a quarter on you.' Klein threw his cards in.

Prescott chuckled and scooped up the stake. He watched his cards disappear into the pack, face down, as Klein shuffled them before putting them away. One's best friend would never know ... he felt a surge of confidence.

'I'm going ahead with the Libra deal tomorrow, Herb,' Prescott announced.

3

At three o'clock the following afternoon, Herbert Klein was sitting on the desk of his partner Tom Warner. They had taken a long lunch-hour with a friend of Klein's, a painter of abstracts named Rotha. They had a couple of bottles of wine at the Plaza Hotel, and sat afterwards with Rotha on the patio at the Museum of Modern Art, listening to him talk. Now they had two of his works before them....

Klein's secretary came in. 'Mr Prescott's on the line, Mr Klein. He says it's very, very urgent.'

Klein slid slowly forward, off the desk, purposely restraining his movement. The panics of his clients were his panics, but he had disciplined himself to come to them quietly.

'Shall I put him through here?' the girl said anxiously.

'Not at all. I'll speak to Mr Prescott in my office in a minute.' His thoughts of the painting were shattered, and his mind was already beginning to reach back to last night.... 'Anyway, Tom,' he said, 'I think you might do a lot worse than buy one....'

When Klein had settled himself behind his desk and

answered the telephone, he sniffed to find only Prescott's secretary on the other end. 'Where is the great man?' he said dryly. He waited.

'Herb? Can you come over here right away ... yes, now. Please. We have a problem,' Prescott said anxiously.

'About March?' Klein looked at the machine in his hand. It was dead.

It was a short ride by cab to Battery Towers at the southern tip of Manhattan Island. Klein was ushered quickly into the conference room at the top of the needle-like building. The meeting was in disarray. Files were abandoned on the long walnut table, which the members of the Board had left in favour of two or three argumentative little conferences at different points round the room. Klein liked to stand by the window and look over Governor's Island and Liberty to the Atlantic, to the little smudges of ships .. but there was to be no peace today. The executives and aides were harried and looked uncomfortable.

'I'm grateful you got here so soon, Herb.' Prescott grasped his arm. 'I feel a damn fool, I don't mind telling you.' He lowered his voice and he passed a paper to Klein. 'Ullman gave me this—*after* I'd finished telling the meeting that the Libra deal was a cinch.'

PRESIDENT BANTRUST NEW YORK
ARRIVING MONDAY MORNING INTERIM REPORT ONLY AVAILABLE
FURTHER DIFFICULT QUESTIONS HAVE ARISEN AND REQUIRE
INVESTIGATION
REGARDS JOHN MARCH

'When did this arrive?'

'Friday or Saturday. It wasn't passed to me. I'll find out why, later,' Prescott said ominously.

'Ah, Herbert!' The sonorous, almost English accents of James Ullman echoed down the length of the room. 'Our legal luminary is come to guide us through this impasse!' He bustled forward and took Klein's hand. Klein looked thin and yellow-complexioned beside the sleek, vigorous Ullman. But

Klein's voice was strong and confident. And he spoke so that the whole meeting could hear him.

'There is no impasse, James, unless you want to create one. You've approved the deal in principle. You need a further investigation. That's all.'

'Oh, my dear Herbert, one can't just wave the magic wand and send our troubles away. This man March must have discovered something——'

'James, let us sit down. Let us all sit down and think this out. March did not necessarily discover anything that would detract from the consortium. He may have found a dozen new questions he wanted answered. That was his job as an analyst, but surely it's going too far to suggest that he must have discovered something *wrong*?'

The men slowly took their seats and the atmosphere calmed.

'You've always been against this deal, James,' Prescott said.

'I'm cautious, that's all. I'm against putting fifty million dollars into hands we know nothing about....'

'That's going too far,' Klein said.

'We know a damn lot about Libra. We know it's one of the most profitable corporate performers in the world in the last ten years,' Prescott said.

'Businesses are men,' Ullman replied, 'and you don't even know the men you're dealing with.'

'Businesses are assets and performance,' Prescott snapped, 'and Libra has them both.'

'Gentlemen,' Klein interposed quietly. 'May I suggest that businesses are assets and the performance that men get out of them?' The others, including Ullman, smiled, but Prescott went on doggedly.

'Libra's sound. I've studied it for years. Transport of freight and people by land and air backed by an international network of hotels and warehouses. When we stop moving, so will Libra. It's a very big package, I agree; but a very neat one, circled and fed by a ring of insurance and investment corporations....'

Ullman scoffed. 'I don't know about the others here, Orville, but you haven't said anything I didn't know years ago. The trouble is you *like* Libra, you're working by intuition.' He

pushed the papers before him out of his way with an air of finality.

There was a pause at the table. The secretaries stopped flicking through files, the senior executives stopped their whispered briefings to their bosses. James Ullman, who controlled perhaps a tenth of First Bankers' stock, was the most influential man present, apart from Prescott. Ullman had to be heard, and there was something ominous under that fruity cordiality.

Orville Prescott was white-faced. His tan had retreated to a selection of ugly blotches on his jaws and bald head. The blue eyes no longer hid behind the reflections from his glasses, but pressed against the lenses, swollen and uncertain. 'My intuition has made First Bankers.'

Somebody muttered approval. Another joined him. Others moved in their chairs more easily. Klein reached for a cigar; his friend had almost been bested, but not quite. Ullman would have to fire again to bring him down. If Ullman bested Prescott, maybe Ullman was one step nearer the presidency. Ullman would certainly sack Klein, and there would be no more excellent cigars and views of the Atlantic Ocean on the second Thursday in every month. So the high-school debate was important, and Klein sought for an intervention in favour of Prescott that was not too obviously partial.

Ullman absorbed the feeling of the meeting without the slightest departure from his amiability. 'Intuition ...' he smiled, bringing one plump hand down from above his head to rest in the space he had cleared before himself on the table. The slowly descending hand, palm down, was watched with fascination. A gold ring with a jade stone adorned the little finger. Ullman suddenly slapped his hand on the table and jerked his head towards Prescott. 'Orville,' he said in a sharper tone than he had yet used, 'have you *ever met* Harry Beech?'

The question stopped Orville Prescott like a poleaxe. His mouth fell open, but no words came.

'We all know what Beech has done ...' Klein cut in.

But Ullman still had the floor. He stood up and pulled his waistcoat down over the bulge, ignoring Klein. 'I think this special meeting has run out of business. To approve the

Libra deal we need more information. We are proposing to deal with people we don't know, people outside the States. I don't know Harry Beech any more than our president.' Ullman moved towards the door, attended by the young man who was his personal assistant, and his secretary. 'Even our legal luminary has never met the estimable Mr Beech.'

4

'Ullman did me a lot of harm yesterday, Herb,' Prescott said sourly, as he watched the cabs, yellow lozenges eighteen floors below, disappearing up Park Avenue into the haze round Central Park. He rarely came to Klein's office. Klein came to him. But the business they were going to transact today was better kept out of First Bankers' offices.

'Get a report in that squashes the March queries, and you'll be vindicated,' Klein said, very comfortably settled in his reclining desk chair, with his Calder and Rothko prints near by.

Orville Prescott didn't really like coming to Century Building. Not because he hadn't the time, although that was always the excuse, but because sitting on the client's side of the desk, and looking at the books and prints around his friend, he was more than ever aware of an intellectual dimension which he could not follow. It gave him some comfort outside this office, because it made Klein seem wiser, but inside it was ... irritating.

'I've patched it up with Ullman privately. I've told him sincerely that I think he was right and I was wrong. We need a further report. But I took a public beating yesterday, Herb. I lost some votes.'

'Who is going to remember a mere argument six months from now, when you're right in the middle of a successful consortium?'

'I hope so. I'm not so sure about this guy you're proposing to use——'

'Macy's a lawyer. A bright one. He has a bum practice on the West Side somewhere.'

'That's not very bright.'

'He was top graduate in his day. We try to get the best, Orville. Left us for Libra. That's where his advantage is. He knows the whole crowd.'

'He's had no financial training. That's where his disadvantage is.'

'Yeah, but March was kinda First Bankers' ambassador to Libra, getting fed with all the sweet pie.'

'You mean this new guy's a snooper?'

Klein nodded with resignation. 'I suppose it will work out that way—at least in comparison with March's efforts.'

Prescott was reluctant. 'I suppose we've got to do something tough. My God, Herb, Ullman got me between the eyes with the Harry Beech thing. There are plenty of corporations I've done a deal with, without meeting the top man, but, you know, meeting Beech was a bit of a sore point. I think that's why I was flabbergasted. I always reckoned I *should* have met Beech. We had meetings set up, and he wouldn't arrive—always send somebody else, perfectly competent, but somebody else. I guess I got to thinking the damn man owed me the courtesy ... and then when Ullman came up with it ...'

Klein lit one of his own cigars. Prescott never smoked. 'Ullman touched base with a debating point, a nice debating point. That's all, Orville. Beech is the kind of man who stays in the background. So what? If what I hear about Harry Beech is true, I'm not surprised he stays in the background. Apparently, when he was scarcely out of his teens he used to have a little office near Pier 47 where he sold tickets for tours round the island. No capital but his wits, and an office he could fold up and move round the corner at the slightest sign of trouble. He was an agent, a commission man——'

'Damn it, Herb, you're so patronizing to people who haven't had the formal education you've had. I started at fourteen in a flour mill at Portland, Maine, and *I* go to my meetings!'

Klein sat up and took his feet off the desk. 'I didn't mean to sound patronizing. You're obviously very different from Beech, Orville.'

The tan had gone again from Prescott's face and been replaced by the dark blotches. 'Different? How different? I

built First Bankers from a suburban savings bank into a major corporation. Beech began to charter buses and aircraft and ships for his customers, and then he began to buy instead of charter. He dreamed it all, he created it all. He must have worked till one or two or three in the morning and gone without his dinner as often as I have——'

Klein looked grateful for the announcement of Macy's arrival. He made no attempt to finish off their conversation before asking for Macy to be shown in.

Orville Prescott knew that his decision not to bring Macy directly into the employment of First Bankers, and to consider him here, under Klein's eye, was the right one, as soon as the man crossed the room and was introduced.

Macy was older than Prescott expected: late thirties, he estimated, tall, thin and bony, hair greying and untidy and too long. The man was untidy in his dress too. necktie like a string, socks hanging down over his shoes. And the colour of the socks ... light green with a dark blue suit. The clothes were old, and wasn't the collar of his shirt frayed?

Macy didn't move like an executive or a lawyer. Prescott was used to them; they moved cleanly, quickly, respectfully. Macy shambled. He came very close to Prescott when he shook hands and smiled; and his grey-dark eyes examined Prescott as though he had nothing to win or lose. He was absolutely unsuitable for the staff of First Bankers, however bright he was.

'I've told Steve a lot of the background,' Klein began.

'Then you'll know how important this is to us. We're putting in fifteen million dollars to start.' Macy didn't react. 'You don't seem very impressed with fifteen million dollars, Mr Macy.'

'You've checked everything out, haven't you?' Macy asked.

'Sure we have. We've had lawyers and financial people working for months. And then this guy March goes and sends a stupid cable——' Prescott replied.

'Okay. I'll come up with a report that shows how stupid his cable was,' Macy drawled pleasantly, placing the task in the category of an easy game.

'Herb, you've given him the wrong idea. I want a proper investigation,' Prescott protested.

'I thought you intended to go ahead anyway and this is merely ... window-dressing for the Board,' Macy said.

The idea had already more than half taken root in Orville Prescott's mind; but hearing it stated aloud, crudely, impudently, made him reject it immediately. 'Nonsense. I don't know what you know about business, Mr Macy, but I don't window-dress for my Board,' he retorted acidly.

Macy did not seem disconcerted. He crossed one leg over the other in the armchair, revealing more of his apple green socks and his thin bare leg, and nodded to Klein. 'Right. An investigation. I suppose March was carrying a draft of his report?'

'I suppose he was,' Klein echoed reflectively. 'You mean——'

'——we could recover it.' Prescott finished the sentence. 'Nobody thought of that. You think like a detective, Mr Macy.'

'I'm a lawyer.'

'We should get our hands on March's papers, Orville,' Klein said.

'There's a Mrs March, I believe. We could send her out there. A sort of compassionate journey. She'd probably be glad to go. She'd get all of March's effects—if there are any.'

'If Libra didn't get there first,' Macy interjected.

'Is that the style of Libra?' Prescott asked critically. 'You're the expert, Mr Macy. You're supposed to know their style.'

'I knew it five years ago.'

'It can't have changed a lot since you left.'

'It has. Libra was essentially a United States operation. Now it's London-based.'

'Why?'

'You know why. The Securities Exchange Commission. There are fewer rules to worry about in London.'

'Steve,' Klein said, 'you must know a lot of people in Libra near the top of the heap——'

'Do you know Harry Beech?' Prescott asked ruefully.

'I never met him. I know the present Number One, Richard West. He was about fifth or sixth when I was there. We worked together a lot. He's been busily cutting throats since——'

'I want a personal report on the reliability of the people at the top,' Prescott said. The idea had just struck him, the phrase: it would satisfy Ullman, 'a personal report on the reliability of top management'; and another tag to go with it: 'completed by a lawyer independently instructed by our attorneys'.

'You want me to look through their mail, too?'

Prescott came back coolly. He was beginning to see some sense in it. 'If it's necessary to protect our interests, I want you to look in the wastebaskets. Unless you feel the job's beyond you.'

Macy was unenthusiastic. 'Libra is three times as big as it was when I was there, and ten times more complicated. London in the centre, then operations here, in Australia, France, Italy, South Africa, and now the build up for this new one in Hong Kong.'

'Steve ...' Klein began persuasively.

Prescott watched Macy like a biologist inspecting a bug. He took in the old, shiny suit, the plastic shoes, the raffish air. 'Why did you leave Libra?' he asked.

Macy hesitated, and some of the complexities of the simple question were suggested by the changing expression of his face. 'I was fired,' he said, throwing the line away casually as he looked out of the window.

'That's not right, Steve,' Klein protested. 'Believe me, Orville——'

'Never mind, Herb,' Prescott said, jerking up his stringy neck as he adjusted his bow tie. 'He's got the job.'

5

Manhattan Island changes character at night. The great towers of finance are deserted, but in the narrow streets of run-down buildings a new life emerges. By day, around Commerce Street and Seventh Avenue the suppliers of rope and porcelain basins and second-hand electric motors ply a dull trade from their dingy shops. But after dark, shutters come down on the shop-fronts and the cellar trapdoors are closed; the insistent

cars and trucks have gone; and for the first time you can clearly hear voices in the street. The shadows of people begin to pass before the lighted signs.

The bar hides behind a steamy window in an alley off Commerce Street. The stark fluorescent lights within cannot relieve the gloom of the rows of bus-like brown seats. The bartender sees all and yet sees nothing, has a word of intimacy for everybody and knows nobody.

The woman came in and sat severely straight, leaving her overcoat buttoned to the throat. Her hair and hands were groomed carefully. She was not pretty; there was a slight thickening of the flesh round her throat. A serious, competent person: a buyer in a store, a secretary, perhaps.

She turned the whisky glass abstractedly on the table top. The drink, while it lasted, represented the right to sit and wait. She had no rings on her left hand.

When the man came in, his coat flapping round him, all of the bar's customers noticed, and did not notice, and knew, and did not care, that he was bound for the woman.

'You've brought them?' the man asked, taking a seat opposite.

The woman took some sheets of paper from her coat pocket; they had been torn from a stenographer's notebook, and bore a scribble of symbols with words in handwriting above them. She slid the pages across the table. The man smoothed them and considered.

'What's this?' He pointed to one of the papers.

'Let me see ... that's the address of the air brokers. Do you want me to write it——'

'It doesn't matter. You're quite sure about this?' The man indicated the whole text of the pages.

The woman paused, nibbling her lips. 'How can I be sure when I don't understand what they're doing...?'

'Richard West, eh?'

'He's next to Beech now,' the woman said.

The man seemed satisfied. He pushed the notes into a pocket inside his jacket, and handed a folded copy of the *Wall Street Journal* across to her. 'It's in there. You can go out to the john and count it. I'll wait.'

'Forget it,' the woman replied, crushing the newspaper into her handbag. She swallowed her drink and stood up.

She went out of the door, a trim woman, no longer exactly young, heading for a small apartment on the other side of town, consoled by what was in her handbag.

The man remained seated. He pulled out the pieces of paper and looked at them sceptically. Then he thrust them away and buttoned his jacket.

'Cheers, Frank,' he said to the inscrutable bartender before banging out through the swing doors on to the dark street.

He walked a block, dodging drunks and knots of teenagers huddled in the shadows.

Where a sign on a building said 'Community Law Center' the man sprang up half a dozen steps from the pavement and unlocked the door. Beside the door, in smaller print, was another notice saying 'Steven Macy, Attorney at Law'.

The offices of Steven Macy alias the Community Law Center were on the first floor. They consisted of a large outer room with a counter, a table bearing an old model typewriter and some chairs.

Macy's private office adjoined: it had a small window overlooking an alley, a safe, a table heaped with files and a desk. An ancient electric heater, like a metallic frog, crouched in the corner.

Macy sat down at his desk and took a half-empty bottle of bourbon from the drawer. He took a long pull, and returned the bottle. He phoned Klein.

'Libra have a problem about that plane. It doesn't have a certificate of airworthiness.... I don't think it necessarily means anything's wrong with the plane. It means fuss at the aviation inquiry, and it may mean it's not validly insured, which in turn means Libra will have to carry the losses.... Richard West's going out to Hong Kong.... I can't say if it's to do with the crash. Could be the consortium deal ... yes, more likely ... what? How did I find this out? ... I looked in the wastebasket.'

6

'Daddy, is that you?' The small voice crept into Steve Macy's inner ear as he held the telephone groggily. He croaked incoherently in reply.

'Watchoo doin' Daddy?'

'Sleeping, sweetie. I was asleep. Hey! Why aren't you at school?' he asked with attacking inspiration.

'Ah-ha! Why aren't you at your office?'

As Macy groped for a reply, the child said, 'Mummy wants to speak to you,' and handed over the receiver without another word. The strident voice of his former wife came through strongly.

'Steve? I called your office. No answer. It's half eleven. Are you out of business?'

'I wish you wouldn't call there ... I've asked you ...'

'I don't have a cheque this month, what about that?'

'You don't have a cheque—what is it, a day overdue? Surely I don't keep you so hard up that a day——'

'It's not good enough. I don't know how you expect Chris and me to manage——'

'I posted the Goddam thing last night!' he shouted, and slammed the instrument back into the cradle. He lay across the disordered bed, his head buried in the sheets. His sudden anger subsided. She was right. Naturally she was alarmed if her money didn't arrive promptly. He lifted his hand to call her back ... and then dropped it.

Macy got up from the bed and drew the curtain to reveal a dirty window overlooking the broken tiled roofs and tipsy chimneys of the West Side near Greenwich Village. The light coming into the room illuminated ancient plaster designs on the ceiling, and flashed on the metal frame of a photograph on the dressing table: a schoolgirl, about ten, snub nosed and happy.

In the untidy kitchen, Macy shifted empty sauce and wine bottles on the table to make room for the coffee pot. He stood naked, feeling his head; it ached, rather with the sudden loss

of temper than the effects of last night's drinking. The pot took a big helping of freshly ground coffee. He filled the pot with boiling water and let it draw for a minute, and then poured out a mugful and took it back to the living room, without sugar.

He drank the scalding sips slowly, seated on the arm of a chair, not lifting his mouth from the rim of the mug. The brew was good: dark and thick. His body, below the shoulders, gave little clue to his age; it was firm, neatly muscled. The face, however, was lined, not with the set, deep lines of age, but with a network of finer, more mobile lines. In one light he might look smooth, in another furrowed. The greying and thinning hair was an unmistakable betrayal. Around the calculating eyes and mouth there was the expression of a certain amused objectivity. Macy had been honed down by adversity.

Macy wrapped a dressing-gown round himself and left the book-lined living room with its heavy smell of cigarette smoke, for the area of flat roof outside the living room windows.

It was warm, but the white haze of midday hurt his eyes. He surveyed the old roofs, washing hanging on strings, flower-boxes.... The high buildings were distant; their glass and steel shone and disappeared up into the mist.

He finished his coffee and smoked, sitting on the parapet of the building. He was contemplating a shave and shower when the phone rang: it was Klein.

'I been trying you all morning at your office, Steve.'

'It took me longer to wash my hands this morning.'

'Whaddya mean ...? Yeah, well, Orville's very pleased with your work. He wants you to look into the crash in Hong Kong.'

'I'm not an aircraft mechanic, Herb.'

'Aw, come on, Steve, we want to get March's report if he did one——'

'Mrs March can get it.'

'She doesn't know a bee from a bull's foot. We've arranged for her to go, to facilitate your taking possession of anything useful——'

The doorbell rang.

Macy cut the phone off. He looked at it before putting it

beside rather than on the cradle: 'Sorry, Herb old son. I'm too busy right now . . .' he said to himself.

He'd have to think about the Hong Kong trip. He wouldn't be leaving much behind....

He opened the door. It was always a shock seeing her.

Barbara stood there, wryly amused. Still trim. Still dark-haired. A shade thinner, more worn around the eyes. Ten years rushed back to hit him.

'I got the cheque, Steve. The mailman came just after I rang. I thought I better call to see if you were all right, you sounded so——'

'Sure I'm okay,' he interrupted, always tense with her, though he didn't want to be.

'Sorry. Am I interfering? One of your little birds?'

'Cut it out, Barbara!' he snapped, standing aside for her.

'You need looking after,' she said, entering.

'Look, we've been divorced for three years,' he replied. Suddenly he decided. 'I'm going to Hong Kong shortly. I'm going to do a job for Libra.'

'So you're back with that lot. Where's the self-denying community lawyer, or is that all old hat now?' she said, stopping in the entrance.

'You know I need the money.'

'Don't forget to call into London and see Linda Hall. She's the one you always wanted. Is she still single?'

'Jesus, Barbara, I very much appreciate your calling, and I'd like you to stay and have a drink but——'

Under her agreeable, well-groomed demeanour she seethed with all the old, raw resentments.

'I'm going,' she said. 'As long as you haven't cut your wrists!'

She took his arm and it was hard for him to look squarely at her. There was a certain understanding between them still....

He closed the door when she had gone and leaned his aching head against it: Linda Hall, the woman who had rejected him. Was there anything to revive?

7

London

The old city is no more. The ancient wall still stands in some few precious fragments but London, the metropolis, has long ago pushed its walls over and left them behind. The old city is gone, but the City is in its place, and the City needs no more room than the same strip between Finsbury Circus and the Thames, because a bill for a million dollars requires no larger a sheet of paper than a bill for ten. The Bank, the Old Lady, deathless, sits in the centre, commanding Cornhill and Lombard Street, Cheapside, Threadneedle Street and Moorgate.

But not all the streets of the City are filled with marbled banking halls. Sparrow Lane, off Old Jewry, seems to be forgotten. Certainly no sparrow has flown in the narrow gap between the sooty buildings for many a year, and even visitors hesitate to walk there. The lane is a convenient place for local merchants to drop the packing cases, used oil drums and polythene wrappers, too inconvenient to take inside their own buildings. Sparrow Lane is visited, grumbling, by the dustmen, but never entirely cleared. For a few years it has been entirely blocked by a wall at one end, and one side consists entirely of the rear of a very noisy printing works. There is therefore only a structure on one side of the street; a building unlucky enough to have become embroiled in litigation as an asset in a disputed estate. The litigation has gone on, while the building has decayed.

The firm of Berry & Co. which occupies a floor of the building is listed at the entrance as 'importers'. Those who work at Berry's have become used to the constant clack of the printing works across the alley; they come and go, oblivious of the noise, of the hard chairs they sit upon, of the cracked cups from which they have taken tea for years.

Mr Khalil, the senior clerk of Berry's, left the office with five separate cheques, drawn in dollars on an account of Berry's

with the Bank of America Trust and Loan Company in New York. He had received some instructions from the manager at the same time. Mr Khalil received the instructions calmly. He thought about them. Where to go, what to do. He never thought beyond that, because he was only concerned to carry out his orders creditably.

Mr Khalil took a small suitcase with him. He had the whole morning. First he visited the foreign exchange department of the Midland Bank in Cheapside. He was known there. He exchanged one of the cheques for Swiss francs. Then he walked along the road to Barclays, where he did the same thing. In all he visited five banks with whom Berry & Co. had dealings, and exchanged all the cheques for Swiss francs. His small suitcase was now packed.

He walked along Cannon Street looking carefully at the buildings to try to find 723. It did not seem to be marked. He searched the small print on the nameplates in the doorways, wasting half an hour. Then he found it, a small entry in a doorway like all the rest he had studied: 'Schmithoff & Co.' He had been about to trudge back and ask the manager, and he would have looked a fool.

There was no further identification than the name he read on the plate. No idea of their business. Third floor was the only clue. When he got there, Mr Khalil could not find any sign saying 'Schmithoff & Co.' He wandered along the corridor in confusion, and by a process of elimination decided to try the comfortable rooms he could see through the glass doors near the lift. 'I'm looking for the office of Schmithoff & Co.,' he said to the woman who approached him as soon as he entered. She was a stern woman, with grey hair swept up on to the top of her head. She looked at him suspiciously.

Mr Khalil pulled a piece of paper from his breast pocket. Typed on it were the words 'credit account 44/43/3601, Schmithoff & Co., 28 Westmannstrasse, Zurich'. The woman took the note with a frown. She looked at his suitcase. 'Come with me.'

He followed her into a cubicle containing a table and two chairs. She gestured that he should put the case on the table

and open it. He did. She counted the money quickly and gave him a total.

'Correct,' he said. She scribbled a receipt.

He was glad to have got rid of the money. He had time for lunch. He went to the Carpenter's Arms near by and bought a pint, and drank it with a cold sausage. He had to gulp the last of the beer down to avoid being late for his appointment.

Mangham's Fish Bar is very popular at lunchtime, but by half past two the crowd has dissipated, and the tables and floor are left stained, and the smell seems stronger than ever. Mr Khalil had no difficulty identifying the man he was to meet; there was a red book on the tablecloth beside his plate of herrings.

Mr Khalil approached the table. The man looked up, still forking a herring into his mouth. He chewed calmly with his mouth open. He was no better dressed than Mr Khalil, a clerk too, probably; about fifty, English, with a hard red–blue complexion and receding grey hair. Mr Khalil tugged his luxuriant black moustache.

'Sit down,' the man grunted through his mouthful. 'He doesn't want anything,' he said, sending away a hovering waiter. 'Do you want something?' he asked Mr Khalil. Mr Khalil shook his head in a faint no.

The man postponed a further herring while Mr Khalil searched for and found the receipt. The man took it, clicked his tongue in satisfaction, and tore the small paper into pieces which fell on to the floor. He stuffed the last herring into his mouth and rose heavily, grasping the red book. It was *Potter's Guide to Rose Cultivation*. 'Tell your friends it's all fixed,' he mumbled, and moved away, leaving Mr Khalil seated at the table, wondering whether he had done everything correctly.

Mr Khalil was not sorry to exchange the smell of Mangham's for the noise of Sparrow Lane. It was a reassuring background. He did not see the manager when he returned, but settled over his desk and became immersed in import declarations and bills of lading.

At five o'clock the manager's black, chalkstripe trousers appeared in the gap between Mr Khalil's lowered eyeshade and the top of the desk. The manager had taken time for a

good lunch, for this appearance was accompanied by a malty waft of best bitter. 'You did that thing this morning, Khalil?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good,' the manager mused. 'Very good. No hitches ...?'

'No hitches, sir ... I was to tell you it's all fixed.'

'All fixed, eh? That what he said? Cheeky blighter!'

8

Buses and cars converged from the approach roads, and crawled past International Flight Terminal 3 at Heathrow, in an endless treble chain, spilling their human contents into the vast building as they passed. Inside was a strange, bright, excited bedlam of crowds, signs, luggage, shops, porters, TV screens and muffled announcements. In the excitement of coming and going, people shouted and laughed and cried; they jostled each other and they waited.

A limousine detached itself from the chain of vehicles and gathered speed down the empty bus lane, swerving away to the left where the road was marked 'Special Visitors' Lounge'. There were no crowds and no cars on this side of the Terminal. The limousine followed the road at its own brisk pace, curling round the lawns to a deserted entrance. Two men alighted carrying small leather cases; they walked together down a carpeted corridor. An official checked their passports and tickets quickly. They were ushered into a lounge with shaded windows and an elevated view of the runways.

The younger of the two men looked round approvingly. He led the older man who was stiffer, more reserved. 'I always enjoy coming through here, you know. Can't see why I shouldn't get some pleasure out of my own toys!'

'Aircraft are not toys,' the older man said. 'I wish they were.'

'Don't be so serious, Jim. Loosen up. We're going to Hong Kong, remember? Have a drink. I like to drink pure gin martinis when I'm flying ... just the faintest whiff of vermouth, please.' A girl had appeared to take the order.

'Beer for me,' the older man said.

'Captain Gray hasn't quite overcome the abstinence re-

quired for twenty years of flying,' the younger man joked to the girl. 'Bring two martinis. He's not flying the Tri-Star.'

Richard West went over to the window and stretched. He could move easily in his suit, which still kept to the curves of his heavy shoulders and hips. His clothes were in quiet tones of blue. The shirt was elaborately stitched in the front; it had heavy double cuffs. The silk tie with its large knot and the matching silk handkerchief in his breast pocket were dark. He might have selected all his clothes a moment ago from an expensive store.

Gray accepted his martini without demur, as West had expected. 'We're not exactly going to Hong Kong on a pleasant task,' he said.

'The crash? That's your job. You're operations boss. I only want to smooth over the negotiations with Oriental Freight.'

They boarded the Tri-Star on time and settled in a private cabin with two of its four capacious seats empty. West threw his briefcase aside. 'I'm not going to work,' he said. The Tri-Star soon rose easily into the sunlight thirty thousand feet over Europe, headed for Rome. Gray read a magazine. West had two more martinis.

West sipped lazily in the bright cabin, but what came to him over the scent of the gin and vermouth was a memory of the reek of dried fish and joss sticks, and the touch of yellow-gold skin, polished, burning ... 'I'm going to have a look round,' he said.

He had noticed the hostess when she served his drinks and brought hors d'oeuvre. Although her smile was fixed according to regulations, and paid for by Libra, behind it was a flash of knowingness that was not. The heavy lips curled round her white teeth wantonly; her breasts pressed urgently against the thin uniform. 'Can I show you round, Mr West?'

She must have known he knew the aircraft. She was under no illusion as to who he was. He let her show him the inter-communications radio, the bar, the stores. He did not listen to what she said. He watched the movements of her hands, her buttocks, the rise and fall of those pressing breasts. He let her pour him another martini, the rest of the shaker.

She beckoned him into the galley and began to show him the wonderful mystery of the cupboards and shelves. The other hostesses were away doing other things, and the curtain was across the entrance. She reached out to a shelf in front of him, and her breast naturally pressed his arm.

He was mesmerized and easing closer to her when she suddenly flashed a big smile: 'Sorry, Mr West, I'll have to go now—duty calls!'

Another girl came through the curtain, saw them, mumbled something, and rushed out. West swore to himself and went to the toilet. He looked at himself in the mirror. His face was flushed deeply. He damped a paper towel and dabbed his forehead with cold water. A pulse beat in his throat.

When West went back to his cabin he was disgruntled not to find Gray there. West could not relax. The effect of the drink had gone. When Gray came back from the flight deck, yawning, West wanted to stir him. 'You realize how careful you'll have to be with this crash, don't you? I don't want anything upsetting the Oriental Freight deal.'

'I'll do what I can. In my opinion,' James Gray said, rubbing his weathered face, 'we oughtn't to have put out all that publicity blaming the air traffic people.'

'And why not? Why take the blame when we don't have to?'

'It's not factual,' Gray said flatly.

Richard West laughed without mirth. 'Jim, you have to realize the facts are what you make them. You're helping to run a business now, not flying an aircraft. If there's one thing I've learned from Harry Beech it's how to feed the press the story I want to read.... The facts don't count, Captain. It's what you say today that counts. We'll deal with the air inquiry when it happens, a year from now.'

'Is it so simple? We can't put the certification for the plane in order by *saying* it's in order, not even through Libra's imaginative press department.'

'You haven't got the right mental approach, Jim. Not having a flight certificate was a gross piece of administrative bungling. Not your fault. The fault of the captain and the ground people in Delhi. If it's revealed it means scathing

public criticism, loss of insurance on the plane, and possibly a loss of confidence by Oriental Freight and First Bankers Trust with whom we're negotiating.' West thrust his thick neck towards the reclining captain and tapped him firmly on the knee with a forefinger. 'Let me tell you, Jim, that the latter is infinitely more serious than either of the first two, and cannot be allowed to happen.'

'Fine, Richard, fine. But I don't see ...'

West spoke dully, all the emphasis that had gone into his previous speech had disappeared. 'Did you ever think we might get a certificate?'

Gray was watching his boss intently. 'Get one *after* the crash? How...?'

A different girl came in and asked them if they wanted to order drinks. It had to be a different one. West sent her away curtly. He maintained the same dull tone with Gray. 'Captain Gray, I am going to tell you something you apparently don't know. I am telling you officially. The documentation of G-AMAC is perfectly in order. There is no reason for you to think otherwise.'

Richard West turned his head away and looked out of the cabin window at the carpet of snowy cloud five thousand feet below. He did not see the spasm of pain on Gray's face, and he expected no reply. His spirits were generally irrepressible, and he was feeling better. He drummed his manicured nails on the window for a moment. 'Let's have a glass of champagne!' He sprang up and smiled. 'I'll call the bird.'

9

Hong Kong

Richard West blotted his eyes and forehead with a silk handkerchief from his breast pocket. He looked at the damp and greasy rag and thrust it disgustedly into his trousers. Even that operation was difficult. The tailor who had made the lightweight suit in a matter of hours had made it too tight. He ought to have known better and resisted the persistent fellow

in the hotel; it was a mistake he had made before.

The light from the garden hurt his eyes. He was sitting on the shaded terrace of a rambling ranch-type house, looking out on to an exquisitely mown and rolled lawn, secluded by trees. But the sky glared, and the trees and the grass glared, polished, reflecting a hundred needles at his eyes. Each one of the heavy cerise blossoms of hibiscus beside the lawn was on fire.

The people on the lawn were unaffected by the heat. They swung their croquet mallets and laughed. They were too far away for West to hear what they were saying. He listened to the click of the balls, and the chock of the mallets. A tall man broke away from the group and wandered over the lawn towards the terrace, a man in a white straw hat and a white suit. He wore a waistcoat despite the heat, with a thin gold chain across his flat stomach.

He addressed West from a distance: 'Hullo, old chap. Risen from the dead?'

It was only when the man entered the shade and West was able to look up under the broad brim of the hat and see the thick-browed brown eyes, and the olive skin, that the impression of an Englishman was lost.

'We always play a little game in the afternoon—if it's not too hot.' He smiled, showing wide, clean teeth. 'It helps the digestion.'

'It may not be too hot for you, Dasilva, but it's too hot for me. It seems to be hotter up here....'

'I think not, my friend. We're hundreds of feet above the harbour. We get all the cool breezes.... Did you sleep well?'

'Very. Thank you. It was kind of you to ask me to stay last night.'

'Not at all. You must stay with me. Give up that nasty room at the Mandarin, and stay here. We're going to be partners soon. We have much to talk about....'

Richard West glanced apprehensively round him at the living rooms beyond the terrace with their ivory clocks and Persian rugs. Six feet away a Chinese servant caught his glance, smiled, and bowed. 'I think it's better if I stay in town.'

'Richard, my friend, you can come and go by car as you please. You shall have a car and driver for your exclusive use. You have three or four rooms available for conferences. My servants are always on duty. Always. You can have fifty people to dine if you wish. And then there is the pool, the record library, the film library if you want to amuse yourself or your friends.' Dasilva listed the advantages of his home dispassionately. 'The Mandarin Hotel ...' he said contemptuously.

'You're a very generous man, José. Very. But I work better from the isolation of a hotel room when I'm away from London.'

'Yes, I was forgetting. You work ten hours a day. I ... what do I do? I am not an English tycoon. I merely survey my interests—between games of croquet. All right, my friend. But James will stay.'

'Of course. He'll love your amah waving a fan over him.'

'And what of your Mr Beech? Will he be coming?'

'I don't know what Harry's movements are.'

'His achievements are very great. I should be fascinated to meet him. He seems to work behind closed doors. He must have tremendous energy to have built up Libra from nothing. My position is quite different, Richard. My family were in Macao in 1770, and settled in Hong Kong a hundred years later. Two hundred years of piracy, and I am the custodian ... not a very active one, I confess.'

The silver grey Rolls-Royce which halted at the far end of the terrace was only made noticeable by the crunch of gravel under its thick tyres. A houseboy ran to open the door. The chauffeur, white-jacketed and as thin as a doll, remained proudly behind the wheel in his roofless driving compartment.

Dasilva swung round. 'Here's Captain Gray and Mrs—'

'Mrs March.'

'Who is she?'

'The widow of a man killed in the crash. The man worked for First Bankers—'

'Ah, our new partners. Of course ... you must extend proper condolences.'

'Jim's going to have a word with her as a goodwill gesture.'

The two men advanced to the end of the terrace to meet the occupants of the car. Mrs March, a small, alert woman in her early thirties, was not wearing black, West noticed. She accepted their sympathy calmly. 'James, please offer my hospitality to Mrs March as your own. Sit down here or inside, call for tea or what you will ... I shall play a little more,' Dasilva said.

'I have urgent work to do at the hotel,' West said. 'Please excuse me.' He shut himself inside the cooled interior of the Rolls, which moved away.

James Gray settled himself in a cane chair on the terrace and ordered tea. He loathed hotels. He'd stayed in too many of them when he was an airline captain, and he was going to appreciate the gardens and the spacious, shadowy rooms with their delicate ivory and jade. He was glad to be out of the stink of the city. With Mrs March, who was not much older than his own daughter, he was at ease. The woman did not feel much grief and did not pretend. He knew how it could be with a marriage without having to be told....

'You've had no trouble with the authorities, Mrs March?'

'No. Well, I haven't seen them yet—I mean I have to identify my husband's body.' She shuddered.

'I wish there was some way I could help. Could I get someone to accompany you? Yes, let me do that, at least.'

'No, Mr—Captain Gray. I feel I've been so much trouble. What with First Bankers flying me out here—'

'Still, your husband was killed in their service.'

'And they're sending someone else, too.'

'That's very good of them,' Gray said, feeling somnolent in the heat. 'Shall we have another pot of tea?'

'More to get John's papers, than for me, I guess....'

Gray heard the words distantly as he waved to the servant who removed the cups, trying to make it clear that he wanted more. A tiny red light flashed on. 'Papers ...?'

'Yes, John was doing some kind of report for them ... I don't know what. He never talked much about what he was doing, and I hadn't seen him for three months before this ...

he was in London, Australia, the Gobi Desert, everywhere but home.'

'And they're sending someone out,' Gray repeated. The croquet players had retired to a pavilion at the end of the garden. Gray could see tall glasses of lime juice, and a silver tray flashed as the houseboys moved busily with the refreshments.

'Without being indecent about it, they made it clear to me that they want to lay hands on John's things pretty quickly ... it's business,' she shrugged.

It was not long before the grey Rolls had returned to wait at the end of the terrace. The wide eaves of the house on one side, and young silver birch on the other, shaded the immovable driver. When Mrs March sank once again into the dove-grey upholstery, and the Captain with the slightest movement of his wrist snapped the door shut upon her, his somnolence had passed. He was wide awake.

The lowering sun shone through the slats of the nearly closed venetian blinds, and striped the walls of the room. Richard West did not disturb himself at first when the phone rang. He barely heard it. The phone rang again. He cursed. It rang yet again, longer and more insistently. The girl giggled. He moved reluctantly from the pneumatic body below him, and crossed the carpet to the desk, where he had left the phone. As he moved he saw a striped creature in the wardrobe mirror with paps of flesh protruding over each hip.

'Yes—never mind—what is it?'

The girl sat up in bed and smiled down at her breasts admiringly. She chucked them, one with each hand, and giggled again. The long nipples stood up erect. West silenced her with a forefinger to his lips.

'Sending someone to Hong Kong—do you know who? —you know who March was, don't you?—a damn clever accountant—we held his hand all the way—he can't say much against us——'

Richard West watched the girl raise one naked leg high in the air, pointing the toe. Her limbs were mirror smooth. She tossed her head and the long black hair which reached

to the middle of her back covered her face. Her eyes sparkled coyly through the hair, and she turned over and snuggled down on the bed.

West turned away. He saw himself in the mirror, and he turned away from that too. 'If March had anything to say, he'd have said it before he went back to the States by telephone or telex, or even by letter. I can't believe he was going back to lay an egg—look, he was a finance executive, he had to find out the facts and without upsetting either his own people or us—he wouldn't have wanted to take responsibility for anything ... but I smell trouble—the only way to be sure is to see the late Mr March's papers—what?—don't be so damned squeamish, James. We must at least see those papers—there may be nothing in them, but we must....'

The girl lay on her back with her eyes shut, her lips slightly apart, her Oriental features a mask of satisfaction.

Richard West stood over her and lit a cigarette, preoccupied.

10

It was deadly cold and the stone room reeked of disinfectant. Macy had seen dead men before, in the streets, in their beds; but this one had been immersed in the sea, and sponged, and examined by doctors, and had had wadding stuffed into his nose, mouth and ears. The attendant pulled open a drawer, drew back a sheet as far as the navel. A filing cabinet of human bodies.

The face showed no sign of having been torn down from the sky to the sea, no sign of the panic that must have flooded through the passengers more quickly than salt water in the last few seconds of life. It was a lean, sallow face, capped with strong black hair. The hair was matted with specks of mud and grit. The face looked upward to the ceiling from dark, closed eyesockets, as hopefully as the face on an old Roman coin. Lines of care had not had time to engross themselves in that forehead. Macy felt the thin thread of mortality.

As soon as Mrs March lifted her shocked but dry-eyed face from the corpse, the elderly Chinese clerk raised the sheet and gently closed the drawer. He said nothing further to Mrs March, but turned his attention to the card which labelled the drawer. It said 'John Harwood March' and the date of death. Against the space marked 'identification', he wrote 'Leila Anne March, widow' and the date. He made other entries on the clipboard of papers in his hand. 'We have a room set aside for personal effects. Please follow me.'

'Are you all right?' Macy asked, as they followed the clerk.

'Sure. The old man helps. I feel I'd be letting him down if I showed any feelings.'

The old clerk led them to a long room where trestle tables had been erected in several rows. On the tables, side by side, were wide wooden trays, each labelled and piled with articles and clothing Underneath the table on the floor were dull, stained and broken suitcases, each bearing a fresh white label. Macy walked down the rows, 'Edwards', 'Rosen', 'Da Costa', 'Blane', 'Rawlinson', 'Reynolds', 'Mikitome', 'Chung' ... he read. A woman's nightdress, a child's doll, a battered watch, a single shoe of good leather caked with mud.

The last worldly goods of John March were no less tawdry. A grey suit splashed with oil, a white shirt dried brown, a red tie that looked oddly almost wearable. The leather belt which had held up his trousers was coiled up in the corner of the tray.

'This is his,' Mrs March murmured. She fished inside a torn plastic carry-bag and held up a small packet. 'Perfume. He must have been bringing me back a present....' She noticed Macy picking up one corner of the suit apologetically. 'Go ahead, Mr Macy. Go through everything. I don't mind. That's what you came here for.'

Macy went through the pockets of the suit. In an inside pocket he found several pages of typescript.

'Take it if you want. Take it.'

'It's not your husband's work. They're Libra papers, calculations ... I'll keep them just the same.'

Together they opened March's suitcase on the floor and picked over the congealed contents, the underwear, the paisley

dressing-gown, the jackets.... 'Nothing here except a supply of pencils. Is this all then?' Macy turned to the clerk who was standing well away from them but watching keenly.

The clerk approached. 'You have seen everything,' he said. It might have been a question or a statement. He turned to lead them out.

'Wait a moment,' Mrs March said. 'John had a document case ... I'm sure.'

'That's what I was thinking,' Macy said. 'Seems natural.'

The old man stopped and examined them through the spectacles that clung close to the small slits revealed by his eyelids. 'Everything has been placed in order here. Many things have been lost, many valuable things, before this room was placed in order. The sea, the boatmen, the police ... I cannot be responsible.'

'We could take a look round,' Mrs March said.

Macy was surprised. He found the room sickening and he couldn't wait to get out. 'Sure we could,' he said, measuring up. 'We'll take a look,' he said to the attendant, and grimly cast his eyes over the heaped trays, and sniffed the fish and oil.

'I am sorry. You cannot. You have seen your husband's property. You may take possession of it upon signing a receipt. You cannot stay.'

'A small bag could easily have been misplaced, put on somebody else's pile. What sort of bag was it, Mrs March?'

'Something like that one,' she replied, indicating a square, stiff-sided notecase about two inches deep, underneath the next table.

Macy picked up the case. 'It appears to belong to Mr Limberg; but perhaps it doesn't.' Macy snicked the case open. 'Yes it does,' he said, replacing it.

The old clerk stood before them like a sergeant-major. 'You are interfering with the property of others. Please leave this room immediately.'

'Better call your boss, or the cops, old man. I'm having a look.'

'Mr Macy. Look at this.' Mrs March pulled a similar bag

from concealment under another table. 'I nearly missed it. I'll bet it's John's. The initials are on the lock.'

The case was not even clipped shut. Macy took it from her, flipped the lid up. Paper, blank paper. Some more Libra sheets which he extracted. A ruined packet of cigarettes. Mrs March's hand reached in front of him and grasped an old lever type lighter.

'It's my husband's lighter. I gave it to him, years ago.'

'He sure travelled light for a guy coming home to report on a fifty-million-dollar consortium proposal.'

'Do you think someone has...?'

'I don't know. I always think the worst till the best is proved. Why was the case misplaced...?'

The attendant had not left the room, but remained impotently at the door, watching. Macy threw the notecase on the March pile. 'You didn't put that in order, Charlie Chan. Come on, let's go.'

'If you do not want Mr March's things, please sign for disposal.'

Macy pushed his face close to the spectacles of the attendant. 'Has anybody else been here by chance, wanting to see Mr March's property?' The little bits of eye Macy could see were chips of granite, the old man himself was carved from brown stone, emotionless. Macy did not even listen carefully to the 'no'.

When they were on the street, Mrs March looked ill. Macy took pity on her. 'You need something to hold you up. I have to report to my boss ... why don't we get a cab to the Peninsula? I can cable from there and we can repair the damage.'

He sat Mrs March down docilely in one of the chairs of yellow hide in the lounge of the Peninsula, with a tall bourbon. Her skin was a match for the leather.

'You were a great help,' Macy said. 'Now you sit there while I go to work....' He began to scribble on one of the schedules he had taken from March. He chewed the pencil. Better make it good. Show progress. Evoke interest. As he bent over, the thick wad of bills in his pocket pressed disturbingly against

his chest. He crossed out what he had written and wrote again:

HERBERT KLEIN
DANIEL & WELLS
1834 CENTURY BUILDING PARK AVENUE
NEW YORK NY
MARCH PAPERS INCOMPLETE APPARENTLY SOME REMOVED
REPEAT REMOVED ANTICIPATE MEETING WITH WEST AND OTHERS
SHORTLY
MACY

That would make them sit up. On further thought, he crossed out SHORTLY and put TOMORROW. Klein and Prescott wanted action, precision. He'd meet Libra somehow. Not tomorrow, because he was thinking of going to Macao tomorrow, to take the bundle of money in his pocket to the tables ... but soon enough to enable him to put 'tomorrow' in the cable.

II

The upper floor of the Shaukewan Restaurant is for private parties. The floors below, four of them, are filled with a bustle of people until long after midnight. The Chinese who can afford it like to dine late and long; they like to sit round the table and laugh and drink, and pick their teeth and play mah-jong noisily. The mysteries of the Chinese kitchen are many, and especially those of the Shaukewan, set down in the bowels of the building where it is damp, and dark, and where the seepage from the harbour comes into the cellars.

But the patrons of the Shaukewan are no more concerned with the rats in the kitchen than they are with the age of the children working there. Amid a crowd of hundreds, a waiter appears to ask them their wish from his offering of four hundred dishes; and he returns to them, though the crowd has not thinned, with exactly their stomach's desire, as though

he had very little to do and they were the only people worth serving.

The upper floor is different. The blinds of the high windows are always closed. The view, and it is an interesting, close view of the harbour with its old wharves and junks, is not likely to be of interest to the diners on this particular floor—for they are never tourists or sightseers. The Shaukewan is in a part of Hong Kong where few Caucasians venture.

The attraction of the Shaukewan for the crowd is good food. The décor is nothing. The lights glare. The floors are tiled. The bowls and the chopsticks are of no distinction. But the upper floor departs from this austerity. It is served by a private entrance, and a private lift. The rooms are thickly carpeted in red. The walls are hung with red silk. The lights are soft. The carved mahogany furniture is old, the many couches low.

On this occasion the main salon has been arranged with one large circular table in the centre. The white cloth hides detailed ivory inlays. Men are seated round the table, small glasses of whisky or brandy before them. Waiters stand by the wall, alert for any sign. The cloth is already stained. The waiters have ladled out the snake soup with a verve that makes it inevitable. One or two of the Chinese men have taken a small bowl of plain boiled rice. They have all tasted rice birds, smaller than sparrows, cooked whole and crisp and eaten whole. The courses so far have been cleared away, and the men can brush aside the rice grains, twiddle their glasses, drink and talk.

The air is full of a rich spicy smell, as fresh as cinnamon but as sharp as lemon. The diners have been savouring the odour from the moment they arrived. It is peculiar, and pervasive, and now that the delicacy of the preceding courses has passed, more evident than ever. The waiters bring wide bowls full of raw green vegetables, kinds of cabbage and lettuce, the leaves whole, cool and dripping with water; they bring tomatoes and cucumber and sliced onion. The men sit up in anticipation and do not replenish their drinks.

Everybody turns round as two more servants ease themselves through the door bearing a tray with a large Mongolian

hot-pot in the centre. The pot is eased by its handles and many hands over the cloth to command the table. The waiters set fresh bowls before each guest. The host, a thin, slightly bent man with a thin chain across the waistcoat of his dark business suit, waves the servers away. He does his friends the honour of ladling a choice portion from the steaming contents of the pot into each of the bowls, his swarthy features rapt with amused satisfaction.

'You know, it always amuses me that in eating this excellent —I think you will find it truly is excellent, gentlemen—this excellent brew, we are doing something illegal.'

Richard West dipped a cabbage leaf in the spicy mixture, rolled it up and popped a portion into his mouth. 'I should think people would smell this a mile off. Are we safe, José?' West smiled.

'It's true, my friend, that the top floor is the safest place. The Chinese know the smell. If we'd been on street level a dozen police on the beat would have scented us.'

'And looked the other way,' joked a Chinese man.

Richard West chewed a piece of meat; it was as tender as rabbit or veal and nearer to either than to chicken. 'Is it really illegal?'

'Sure. Here. You can eat it in England,' the same Chinese said.

'But then the English are more liberal,' Dasilva said. 'They can be liberal about it because they don't have any appetite for dog. The Chinese, and we of Hong Kong, are very partial to dog. It's a great delicacy.'

West dipped into the communal pot and examined the lightly boned knuckle with bits of hairless skin adhering. He lifted it with his chopsticks. 'What kind of dogs are these?'

'Young Chows. Woolly puppies, fattened up——' Dasilva rose as the main door opened. A Portuguese lady with a sequined mantilla leaned into the room and smiled. 'Come in, my dear. Come in by all means and bring your friends.'

The Portuguese lady advanced. She was over forty. Her stately figure was wrapped tightly in a short gown of dark, embroidered silk. She had a pile of shining blue-black hair. She removed the mantilla and gestured her friends forward.

In came a procession of girls and young women which outnumbered the men by two. They were Portuguese and Filipino and Chinese, provocatively dressed, and each attractive in her own way.

Dasilva moved away from the table easily. 'Our guests are a little early, but none the less welcome for that. Please take seats,' he insisted, and the visitors put themselves in various encouraging poses on the couches. More drinks were served. 'You have your choice of these lovely ladies, Richard. Not Maria, of course. She is the boss, but any of the others, whoever you fancy. I think one or two of us know one or two of them but that's no matter. We're not bespoken.'

Some of the men were talking in Chinese, some in Portuguese as the society at the big table broke up. Dasilva, who had paid special attention to Richard West, the only European present, came round to him. 'The others find it a little easier to talk Hong Kong talk. You mustn't mind.'

'I don't. They've managed English all night. I'm turning my attention to these film stars ... they look expensive.'

'These are not ordinary whores, my friend. You see that one on the end, the little Filipino? She drives the latest Mercedes Benz. The one next to her, the Portuguese, owns an apartment block. You should see her penthouse. If you want, you can go there. It's up to you. Yes ... they are the best; they're professional "entertainers", thoroughly professional, but then so are you ... ah, one moment.' Dasilva paused and took an envelope from his pocket. 'While I remember, Richard. This is what you wanted.'

West turned the envelope over in his hand. He recognized Gray's handwriting: 'For Richard West, urgent and personal'. 'Gray gave this to you?'

'Yes. He left for Delhi this afternoon—you would know anyway ... he said he wasn't sure he would see you, and he didn't want to leave the envelope anywhere. In Hong Kong one never mentions such things at dinner, but you are all work, Richard. I thought you'd want it.'

West tested the long paper sleeve with his fingernails: it was sealed tight.

'Don't look so worried, my friend. I've not opened it. We're

partners. I trust you.' Dasilva straightened up elegantly and looked down his thick, dark nose at West.

'Don't be silly, José; there's nothing——'

One of the Chinese men clasped both his hands on to West's arm affectionately. 'Excuse me. It is a shame that the great architect of our consortium could not be here tonight.'

Richard West fended the man off gently. 'I've put everything in order I think, Mr Lee.'

Dasilva nudged West on the shoulder with a mild reproof. 'Don't be so touchy, Richard. Everything is perfect. You can't blame a man who's contributing ten million pounds to your enterprise wanting to meet the man behind it!'

'Not at all, Mr Lee. I'm sorry. Harry is very busy....'

Mr Lee continued to smile. 'Perhaps we should attend to the ladies.' He bowed.

'Now to the important business,' Dasilva said, laughing. 'No need to worry about them overhearing us. Only Maria can understand English at the rate we're speaking, and she expects to hear the points of her girls discussed. What about the Filipino? Very hot. As spicy as the dog stew. It's on the surface, ready to bubble over. But the Chinese girl's figure is better, the one with the red rose. She must be carrying the rose for you——'

'I like the Filipino better. She's smaller, more manageable....' West said.

'The girl with the rose has beauty.'

'Too aloof.'

Dasilva toyed with his watch chain. 'The passion is underneath, hidden below those calm curves, and once it erupts——'

'How pale the girl next to her is!' West said, and the girl seemed to know she was the subject of attention for she stiffened and turned from the conversation with her companion.

'She's Portuguese. At least, we say Portuguese in Hong Kong. She's a mixture, like me, and I'm Portuguese. Some Chinese. A dash of English. No Indian in her blood I would guess. The white skin—that's pure Portuguese. She has a Portuguese name, too, if I remember. Her breasts are perfect. You can see. The cleft!'

'You're a connoisseur, José.'

Dasilva smoothed his short, greying hair. 'It's a privilege of wealth ... and the girls enjoy it. They know what we're doing, but they don't know what we're saying.'

'The Portuguese has a very good backside. Juts out. I saw it when she came in,' West said, scanning the reclining women more avidly.

'Ah, you too are a connoisseur, Richard. I'm glad you're taking an interest. Forget about work. You can read your mail tomorrow morning ... yes, she has, if you like that part. The one in gold, two along from her, is Portuguese too——'

'I don't fancy her——'

'If you like legs, long, long legs, the Shanghai girl, the tall one. You see, she's showing a good length through the slit in her frock.'

'She has a sad face.'

'Shanghai girls are beautiful, but temperamental. Thoroughbreds. Difficult to handle.'

'What about the one with her knees up? Am I right? Can I see her—her fanny?'

'Yes. I'm afraid she's a common girl, out of keeping with the rest ... but there are those who like common girls, ugly girls with flat faces like hers. You see, she knows we're talking about her. She's opening her knees a little to give you a better view,' Dasilva said tolerantly.

'I'll take the Filipino.'

'A second course of dog stew, eh? Excellent. I shall have the Shanghai girl. I know her a little, you see....'

Without any apparent sign, Maria approached Dasilva who muttered two or three inaudible words. He did not look at her. Maria cruised past the couches. The Filipino girl rose and beckoned West to follow.

The girl locked the door of the bedroom and put her small hands on his. 'We stay, or we go. As you please.'

'I don't mind,' West replied, taking the long envelope from his pocket.

'Okay,' she said, evidently taking it that they were staying. She disappeared into the bathroom and West sat down on the

bed. He tore open the envelope, vaguely aware of the sound of rushing water. Inside were half a dozen blotchy sheets of paper, handwritten, with many alterations, but not so smudged that they were illegible.

The girl came back, singing under her breath. She stood close before Richard West. She waited. He did not look up. 'My name is Melita,' she said. 'I know you. You are the number one boss, Richard West.' West said nothing. 'I am very lucky,' she said. West went on reading. 'M-e-l-i-t a,' she spelled.

'Sure. Melita,' West grunted without lifting his head. She undid her blouse and threw it aside. West took a thin white-gold pencil from an inner pocket. The girl dropped her bra at his feet. He tapped the pencil against his teeth. Her silken underskirt slid down to touch his shoes. He turned back to the first page to check something. She kicked off her embroidered slippers. He made a calculation in the margin of the paper. Her tights were drawn down her legs with a hiss. He finished his study and slowly put the pages together and folded them. The tiny scrap of red lace which served as her knickers landed gently on his knee.

He felt the warmth radiating from her naked body before he looked up. She was childishly small-breasted, golden-skinned, with large, round, dark eyes. She smiled innocently. She was not offended by lack of attention from the heavy-necked man who crouched over some papers, straining the seams of his business suit. She knew that eventually ...

Richard West removed a flat lighter, machined to the same finish as the white-gold pencil, from his pocket and applied the flame to the pieces of paper. The late John March had been a very astute man, a man able to reason cleverly. He had met March a few times, and underestimated him.

West reached for an ashtray as the paper was consumed and turned to ashes. 'You going to set me on fire?' the girl said.

'Not with a cigarette lighter,' West laughed, consigning the ashes of the late Mr March's reasoning carefully to the tray.

'A secret-service agent,' she giggled.

'Merely a careful businessman,' Richard West retorted, slipping off his jacket....

12

'Curse it!' Macy said, looking out of the windscreen of the Land Rover at the blue sky above the building. 'I was going to take the day off! Should've done. Don't know why I'm wasting my time here!' He unbuttoned his collar.

The Chinese policeman in the back of the vehicle did not reply. He sat perfectly still with his shiny boots together and the peak of his black cap well down over his eyes.

The Land Rover was drawn up beside one of the fortress-like concrete structures at the end of Nathan Road, where the road begins to rise to Sha Tin and the New Territories. The old resettlement estate, built to house refugees from China, was alive with people. The high-pitched voices massed together in what was almost a shriek. The balconies were thick with children, clothes dried on poles poked out of holes on every storey of the windowless block. Kites flew from the concrete ledges, catching the hot draught of air from the town as it passed over the estate and up the hill through the shanties of those who were not lucky enough to have one of the concrete cells.

A throng of people moved past the vehicle, poorly dressed, old, carrying heavy bundles of cloth or paper. Most of them glanced warily at the car. Most of them avoided it. A crowd of urchins threw some stones from a distance. A gang of older boys, in their teens, with torn shirts and bare feet and dirty hair gathered near by. The constable jumped smartly out from under the canopy at the back of the Land Rover. He shouted to the gang and brandished the truncheon thonged to his left hand. His right rested on the pistol at his hip. The youths hung their heads and moved on.

A European police officer came across the dry clay space towards the vehicle. Before him were two Chinese constables prodding an old man. The old man's slippers kicked up the dust as he was urged along. 'Is this him?' the European said

to Macy when they were beside the door.

'That's him,' Macy said, though he found it difficult to recognize the mortuary attendant without the stiffening of his suit. The old man was bent, tears ran from his eyes which did not have the protection of the tight spectacles, and the white vest revealed the hollowness of his chest.

'Get him inside,' the European ordered. The Chinese constables dug their truncheons into the attendant's kidneys as he scrambled in the back. One threw a twisted article on to his lap.

'What's that?' Macy asked.

'Silly old bugger dropped his glasses and trod on them,' said the European, easing his Sam Browne and pistol as he placed himself on the seat beside Macy. Macy looked down at the officer's hairy knees in khaki shorts.

'Don't be too rough with him, Kevin. Just an inquiry....'

The party hunched in the Rover while the European talked to the attendant. Their voices rose, at times, hysterically. The old man renewed his tears. Macy heard the word 'Alvarez' several times, but that was the only word he recognized. 'I've pushed him as hard as I can,' the European said, finally. 'He won't say any more than the fact that he was asked to pinch the papers by a man called Alvarez. He doesn't know him. He was paid a couple of hundred Hong Kong dollars.'

'Let him go,' Macy said.

'Wait a minute. When I said I was going to tear his room apart, he admitted he still had some papers. Apparently he thought he might be able to sell them too.'

'Great. Let's get them.' Steve Macy whistled at the unexpected bonus. The lieutenant and his men prepared to go, shoving the old man ahead.

'I'll leave Chen here,' the lieutenant said. 'Not that he's exactly company, but the locals would dismantle the car like piranhas eating a sausage if we left it alone. They might dismantle you, too.'

When the lieutenant returned, sweating and puffing, he handed over three sheets of notepaper. 'The old bugger said he was expecting Alvarez to come for these this afternoon. They're like children, these people. Wanted me to tell him

what he should say to Alvarez. I scared the piss out of him, I can tell you. Ha! Maybe this Alvarez will throttle him this afternoon!'

'I'm very grateful for your help, Kevin.'

'Not at all. Help a friend. Remember old times in Hong Kong! The Cellar Bar. How long was that ... six years ago?'

'You know I'm only working for somebody, Kevin. I get paid for results. So I brought this.' Macy passed a folded paper across.

The European looked inside the fold quickly, and sent a glance back to his constables who were watching silently. 'Very civil, Steve. Very. I'll give the boys a slice too.'

Macy looked down at the pieces of paper; they were light blue and bore the embossed crest of Claridge's Hotel. March's smudged handwriting, he presumed. Lists of figures divided into countries: USA, Australia, South Africa, Italy, all the places where Libra operated. And then a list of assets with a strange name he had never seen before: Cobral SA, Lausanne. Obviously a Swiss company. Who or what was Cobral? One page was devoted entirely to a list of planes, only a few of the Libra fleet. Each plane had a number of years beside it. He saw 727 G-AMAC—the crashed plane. March had written '6 years' in the margin, and a figure of 500,000 dollars. He would have to study the pages later. He put them away and began to concoct a cable for Klein, as the Land Rover began to move....

Richard West's hand shook almost imperceptibly as he held out the three pieces of blue notepaper with the crest of Claridge's Hotel at the head of each soiled page. His face had reddened and the pulse in his heavy neck beat over his tight collar. 'How dare you act in a matter like this without consulting me! I gave you your orders personally, because of the delicacy of the operation! And now——'

'Now you have the whole of the March Report.' Evan Cooper leaned back confidently on the arm of the chair, a thumb of one long fingered hand hooked inside his waistcoat.

'At what price do I have it? At what price? Loss of First Bankers from the consortium? You've done a good job of

negotiation here, Cooper. You know that we've persuaded both Oriental Freight and First Bankers that there are others just as hotly interested. You know that nobody else is interested. If we lose First Bankers, we lose the consortium. And you lose your job. Did you think of that?'

'I could hardly forget that I'm to run the consortium.' The graceful hand came out of the waistcoat and felt the position of the sleek, yellow hair that turned in a curl at the back of the neck. Every hair was in place. The blue eyes were harder now.

'Run the biggest freight handling operation in the Pacific Basin, when you can't snatch a handful of papers off a dead man? Pardon my misgivings.'

Cooper crossed to the sideboard of Richard West's reception suite. He poured a glass of iced water from a crystal decanter. 'You're being emotional, Richard. Remember what Harry says about emotional decisions and emotional statements——'

'You're not Harry's personal assistant now,' West sniffed. The 'Richard' irked him, when he was using 'Cooper'. Cooper was a brat, an upstart, almost never wrong ... except this time. He was too young. West let him go on——

'Harry believes in striving for objectivity. You think the game back, you think the game forward, all the possible moves. Like chess. The game starts with the fact that March was an agreeable and modest man. Nobody thought that he might therefore have a mind like a razor. He apparently did. So it is vital that his conclusions do not fall into the hands of his employers. Those conclusions might not put them off, but equally they might. Someone working for First Bankers actually obtained physical possession of part of the report, so——'

'How could this—this mortuary fellow play you for a fool?'

'Because he's a cunning old grafter. As soon as he knew the papers were wanted he handed some over for a fee, and later said he'd found some more, and wanted more money—much more when he found the fish were biting. What he didn't calculate was a visit from the police. It scared him to death. They beat him up, threatened jail, and he revealed the other papers.'

'So First Bankers have placed it in the hands of the police.

Don't you see what this means? It means they already anticipate opposition, illegal action. And they must draw the conclusion that it's because we want to stop them seeing the March papers. Who else would bother to steal the papers?'

Evan Cooper was working coolly. He knew his ground. 'I don't agree, Richard. It's unlikely that there was any *official* complaint. The First Bankers man simply used the police, probably paid them to make an inquiry, to knuckle the old man. Quite normal here. I doubt if you'll find there are any police reports, complaints, etc. This is Hong Kong. After five years here, I know. The police have enough to do without going through arrest and trial on trivial graft.'

'Who is the First Bankers man? He must have known what to do.'

'We don't know. Alvarez tells me he's a European. A local man probably. But you can see it was necessary to—to deal with him immediately. Alvarez and his friends were actually in the building when the police finished booting the old man round. They went in for their turn afterwards. And they were in time to find out that the man in the police Land Rover had the papers. They followed Alvarez telephoned me. I made my appraisal, and my decision, and I believe they caught up with him in the lift going down to the Cellar Bar, on Kowloon side. Lifts are most convenient. They put the man to sleep with a block of wood, between one floor and the next. The journey between floors was rather slower than usual. And the result is that you have the precious papers.'

'Suppose this Alvarez and his thugs are caught?'

'Quite impossible. They have melted into the air. Robberies happen every day by the hundred in Hong Kong. Nobody helps anybody else. There are never any witnesses. Everyone turns the other way. Nobody sees anything. The man himself wouldn't have had a chance to even see his assailants.'

Richard West was mollified. There was a good chance Cooper had pulled it off, but it wouldn't do to show his opinion. 'What happens when the man tells First Bankers the March papers have been stolen from him?'

'They'll think it could have been part of a robbery designed basically to get money, an incidental loss. You see, Alvarez

took his watch and his bankroll too—a little bonus.'

'Well, those are the facts and we're stuck with them. Now I have to change....'

'I say, that's a nice shirt, Richard,' Cooper said, fingering the olive green material cast over the back of the couch. 'London?'

Cooper had the art of surviving He seemed to enjoy being on a knife edge. 'New York,' West replied.

The blond head on the tall figure moved casually towards the door, and then turned. 'Oh, tell me one thing, Richard—now that you're in possession of all the facts, would you have made a different decision?'

13

Macy came to slowly, his consciousness advancing down a long dark tunnel towards the light. As he advanced, he discerned a huge red face, with a black beard. He pressed stupidly forward and the face receded: he was staring at the side of a house, pink washed stone fringed with creeper; the eyes that had so alarmed him were shuttered windows. It was not Hong Kong, because there were no houses like that in Hong Kong, was the first frightening realization. He was lying on his back, saturated with sweat, his head turned to one side, looking out through an open balcony, from the bed.

His head ached and he moved it painfully to enlarge the view. The pink house was one of a row which fell away downhill, with Roman tile roofs and shuttered stone façades washed in faded colours. His mind went back to retrace its way forward. The hot pavement of Kowloon. His satisfaction at having recovered the report. The thirst. The prospect of a beer. The lift at the Cellar. The Chinese coolie leaning over him. Going down on to the floor of the lift, not because he was felled, but because he was meant to go down. The tearing at his clothing. The muttering of the men. And their oily breaths. The sharpened three-cornered file, each long edge razored. The sickening fear that the blade would be used. And finally darkness.

But he was not too badly hurt. There was a lump on his head, but the present pain might have been the effect of drink ... perhaps he had been knocked silly when he got up from the floor of the lift. The people stared. Quick stares, and then passed on, by the lift. Nobody spoke to him. Nobody offered him a hand. The buttons had been torn from his jacket. He was a tramp, or a drunk; he was nobody's affair. The report was gone of course, and all his money, the bundle he was going to take to Macao That was the last straw. The report they could have if they were in such a fuss about it, but the money! The loss of the money hurt more than his head. But his wallet and all his personal papers were still in his pocket. And he went straight to the bank and drew another wad from Prescott's expense account. He would explain later.

And then he remembered that he had tried to explain. Did he ever get the phone call through to Klein? The operator at the hotel insisted it was three o'clock in the morning in New York. No, the call hadn't ever been connected, otherwise why would he have been sitting on a bar stool drafting cable after cable, and downing whisky after whisky, and then finally, surrounded by screwed-up balls of paper, given it all up? What could he say? 'I found the report today and on the way back to my hotel I was robbed, and the thieves took the report as well. Very sorry.' Prescott would ask him if he needed someone to hold his hand. A holiday was needed, time to think things over....

The room was old and brown with a high, soft double bed. There was a coloured picture of the Madonna on the wall. The woman lay across the end of the bed. She was turned away from him. He could see a tousle of brown hair, her white back, her bottom and a smudge of dark between her legs. The bed was wide enough for her to lie comfortably, her legs drawn up a little. She started up and surprised him. She quickly pulled the coverlet over her breasts. A Chinese servant was standing in the doorway, emotionless. The servant pointed to the ancient telephone beside the head of the bed. The woman shut the door in the servant's face and went to the phone. She picked it up and listened. 'Just a minute,' she

said, and planted the old microphone with its separate receiver on his bare chest.

Macy clapped the receiver to his ear and heard something like the sighing of the sea. He felt seasick. 'That you, Mr Macy?' It was Prescott. Macy bleated a reply. 'Herb hasn't heard from you ... been tryin' to get you for two days ... what you doing...?'

The woman sat down on the edge of the bed close to him and let the coverlet fall away. Macy raised his eyebrows. 'I'm —I'm working on it.'

'Whaat?' the line crackled. 'Thought I better get you myself, and get some action. That information you got in New York about the air certificate? ... remember? ... yeah ... it was wrong. Checked through our air brokers. All the papers for the crashed plane were OK. Just thought I'd let you know ... doesn't matter much one way or the other though....'

'Papers can be put right. Libra have fixed it.'

'Can't accept that, Mr Macy ... never mind, doesn't matter much one way or the other....'

Macy searched for something to say ... the blue notepaper with Claridge's crest. 'Can you find out who controls Cobral SA, a company operating from Lausanne?' Attack was the best means of defence with Prescott.

'Make inquiries through our Swiss bankers. Sure. Why?'

'It was a name that was important to March ... on the few scraps of paper I got hold of....'

'What makes you think March's papers were removed, Mr Macy?'

'I'm sure because ... because ... because no executive arriving to deliver an urgent and complicated report carries a few sheets of blank paper in his briefcase....'

The line groaned, and it was like Prescott groaning. 'Can't necessarily accept that, Mr Macy ... talkin' about *removal* of papers, unethical action by Libra....'

Macy snarled into the phone 'There's more to it ... I can't explain now....'

'What in tarnation you doing in Macao, anyhow ... had a terrible time tracing you ... hours of long-distance inquiries....'

Macy sighed. Frowned at the receiver. Grinned at the woman, and bent over, looking into her navel, his face an inch away. He pulled the microphone close. 'I'm on to something, Mr Prescott, I tell you....'

'How about Mrs March ... she a help...?'

'Sure ... sure ... Mrs March was most co-operative....'

The woman blushed and threw herself back on the bed. Macy hung up the phone. 'I've had enough of the old goat for today. I've been neglecting my duties, Anne ... how long have we been here?'

'Nearly two days. Don't you remember? I think you were a bit high when we ran into each other in the foyer of the Mandarin ... and you offered to show me an old Portuguese town. No, that's not quite true. I said I'd like to come, since you were coming, and I wouldn't be any trouble.'

'You haven't been any trouble, sweetheart.'

'I don't know what you'd have done without me, Steve. I never saw a man drink so much or spend so much or——' even though she was looking up at the ceiling there was a momentary pause of embarrassment, '——or screw so much.'

'Thank you, Mrs March. I'll take that as a compliment. I want you to know that I do not always live like this.'

She laughed. 'A time for speeches. Thank you, Mr Macy, and I want you to know that I enjoyed living like this.' Then her voice changed to a softer note. '... I don't expect anything more.'

They showered together and dressed, and shared a bottle of rosé wine they found unopened under the bed. She brushed his lapel and straightened his tie. 'When you get your next pay, Steve, buy something decent to wear.' She shook her head hopelessly and kissed his cheek. 'You need looking after....'

He patted his pockets. 'I'll fix up the little man on the way out. I haven't paid anything here, have I?'

'No. And you won't be able to without this.' She took a clip of red Hong Kong hundred-dollar bills from her handbag and held them up.

'Don't worry, sweetheart,' he said as he went through his pockets. The wallet was empty. He had a few cents in change

in his trousers. 'Cleaned, huh? They cleaned me out. Ah, well, I expected that.'

'They sure did, Steve,' she said, 'but what a tussle!'

Richard West took a moment to scrutinize the character who accosted him at the desk as he was getting his key from the clerk. He took in the rumpled suit, the tousled hair, the easy grin on the rather dissipated face of the man as he leaned carelessly on the desk.

'Got time for a drink?' the man said thickly, as though he'd already had a few. No preliminaries.

Only the slightest pause was necessary for West to place the man; evaluate the suggestion, and move his head negatively. 'Macy, isn't it...? Steve Macy. It must be five years ... yes, all of that.'

'You've done well, I hear. Right at the top. Outside Harry's door....'

'You don't look as though ... you're keeping the best of health.' West took the key and letters proffered by the clerk and looked at them.

'I've had some blows lately....'

West was absorbed in the messages. 'I'm sorry, Macy. I don't have much time. I'd like to ... hear about it over a drink, but ...'

'But you don't have time ...' Macy said easily.

'I've come back for a quick shower, and then I'm off to another meeting. We've an air crash on our hands—I don't know whether you know.'

'Sure, I know.'

West crumpled the message forms in his fist and moved towards the lifts. The man looked disconsolate. 'Yes, well....' West arched his wrist pointedly and looked at the face of his watch, moving a further step. 'I'll ring you if you like when we've each got more time ... who are you with?'

Macy swung away. 'I'm at the Hilton, doing something for First Bankers Trust.'

West checked his step. Macy's eyes were still on him. He concentrated on the watch again. 'Damn thing cost three hundred dollars and I think it's fast ... I've actually been

wanting to meet the First Bankers man here. Have you come over specially for this——'

'When you have time——' Macy said from the corner of his mouth, and shambled away.

Richard West was left standing. He clenched his teeth. 'Blast him!' he said under his breath as he fired the crumpled ball of paper in his hand into the ashtray by the lift, and the attendant stepped back in surprise.

14

Macy was at a dead end and he knew it.

West had brushed him off, and he had nearly puked anyway in trying to speak to the man. The March report had been stolen in circumstances where First Bankers were unlikely to believe Libra were implicated. First Bankers were dissatisfied with progress. There was no definite line to follow.

Perhaps he ought to enjoy his expense account for as long as he could and go home. But there was one avenue to try first: the civil aviation people. Maybe there was a lead in the air certificate business—even that, Libra had been able to fix. Not too surprising that they should. But it might pay to look. So he entered the arid corridors of the government.

Macy was surprised at the alacrity with which he was seen by a gentleman described as an inspector of the crash. He was a heat-wasted Englishman with hollow eyes and his hair plastered down as though he had newly come from the shower.

'Sit down, Mr Macy. You'll understand we have to record the interview, because we're compiling a report....'

'There'll be an inquiry?' Macy asked.

'There will indeed. All the evidence we can assemble will have to be presented to find out the cause.'

'I represent First Bankers Trust of New York. First Bankers employed one of the people killed in the crash, John March....'

'How can I help you, Mr Macy?'

'I'd like to know something about the crashed plane——'

'You'll appreciate that I can't say much, Mr Macy. The department itself is facing allegations of negligence in the control tower——'

'Do you know how old the plane was?'

'Not off hand ... it was a fairly late model of proven performance. I don't think age is of importance.'

'Do you know what condition it was in?'

'I can't disclose matters of that kind. There's going to be an inquiry on the point when we have the evidence assembled.'

'I'm told all the air certificates weren't in order.'

The official paused and his nose twitched in a faint spasm of alarm. 'As far as I'm aware they were ... but really, Mr Macy, you can't expect me to provide the evidence for a suit against either the airline or the government, in favour of the late Mr March's relatives....'

The broken hull of the crashed plane had been hauled to a corner of the airport when it was recovered from the sea, and cordoned off. The cabin looked like a tin can that had been peppered by shot from a shotgun. The wings and tail section had broken off and lay on the ground beside the main part. The engines had either torn away or been removed, and were set alongside each other like three huge bugs.

The Chinese police constable stepped forward to stop Macy as he neared the break in the cordon of rope. 'Sorry, sir. You must have pass signed by the Civil Aviation.'

'I just want to take a look around, I represent one of the people killed in the crash.'

'Sorry.'

He could see the constable was a little worried at refusing him, and looked for confirmation to the police Land Rover stationed inside the cordon which contained a pack of men, roasting in the heat.

Macy saw a European police officer get out and begin to walk towards him. This was hopeful.

The officer was polite but firm. No. He looked like a very new cop.

'Do you know Kevin Riley?' Macy asked.

'Sure. Quite well.'

'Do you think you could call him on your radio and get him to vouch for me?'

'You're supposed to have a pass, but . . .' He was anxious to please.

The young cop called Riley, and by a chance was able to speak to him. A long parley went on. Then he came back.

'Riley says to let you in.'

'Thanks. I shan't be long.'

Macy wandered round the huge bits of twisted metal and learned precisely nothing. There was not even a thread from a coat to remind one of the hundred or more people who had been aboard and who had died. The seats had been taken from the hull, and piled in a twisted heap of refuse. The cockpit section had been cut open and bore signs of having been examined professionally. The motors had been partly stripped and parts were lined up on the ground.

Macy found three men carrying out an examination of a panel of instruments on a makeshift table as he came round the corner of one of the towering tail sections. They wore white jackets like doctors. The two Chinese ones began to walk away, leaving the European taking notes on a pad. It was an opportunity too good to miss.

Macy fudged his own position: 'Hullo. I'm over from the States to make a report on this . . .' He moved his arm to include the wreck and half of Kowloon, relying on a spark of common interest in the note-taker.

The man gave him the friendly but perfectly dissociated smile of a boffin absorbed in his work. 'Nasty, isn't it. . . .'

Better plunge in: 'Have you . . . er . . . reached any conclusions?'

The boffin's eyes widened behind his spectacles. 'I should say so . . . quite a number.'

The ball was back with him, and he wished he had a good controversial scientific snippet to throw in to get the man talking freely. He gathered up all his emphasis. 'About as clear a case as you get of pilot error.'

The boffin smiled as he poked a long thin steel pin into the workings of the instrument under his hand. 'I wouldn't say that . . . all I would say is that we haven't found anything

wrong with the plane, and it's not necessarily a *sine qua non* that the pilot must have been at fault. There are other possibilities, but it's not for me to speculate on them.'

Macy scratched his head which was sweating freely. 'They're good planes....'

'I didn't say *this* was a good plane,' the boffin retorted meticulously. '*This* plane was just about worn out, ready for major overhaul and survey—engines and hull, but we haven't found anything *wrong* with it so far. It's no crime to be old.'

'It's about six years old,' Macy said. Assertions were more effective than questions.

'It is.'

'Worth maybe half a million on the books.'

'I don't know anything about values.'

It was Klein calling this time. Macy took it in bed as he was sipping a large neat Scotch whisky and preparing to go to sleep, that same night.

'What's the significance of Cobral, Steve?'

'I don't know yet. It was a name noted among March's papers and he must have regarded it as important.'

'Well, I dunno. I can tell you something about it anyway. It is administered by a book-keeper in Zurich; its shares are issued to "bearer" so we don't know who the shareholders are. Our bankers tell us the company has substantial assets in the shareholding in various transport and shipping companies run from Panama, Liechtenstein, the Bahamas and the Netherlands Antilles.'

'All tax havens.'

'Yes but so what? Seems to me we have no useful information from March's papers, and there's nothing more you can do in Hong Kong, Steve.'

'Herb, I am going to tell you this. I know Prescott won't believe it. He needs a signed affidavit before he believes anything. Herb, *some* of the March report was removed by Libra from March's papers. I know because I found the guy that did it. And he had some more of the report. I scared him and got hold of it. Libra found out, slugged me and took it. How about that?'

'Steve, that is one of the most astounding things I ever heard. Are you sure you're not mistaken? Slugged you?'

'They took my watch and money for good measure.'

'So it could have been an ordinary theft....'

'You can stuff it, Herb....'

'How do you know it's actually Libra? ... I could think that a lot of people might be plundering baggage in an aircrash.'

'Well, there you are....'

The pleasures of Dasilva's house were considerable, but James Gray was lonely and bored as he always was when he left home for long. He would rather have been back in the garden of his quiet house in north London than in this luxurious home on the hillside of Hong Kong island, or whipping off to Delhi and back to consult with the aviation authorities. He knew he ought to take more interest in the places he visited, but he had travelled so far, so often, that he had lost the taste. He had therefore been pleased to see a known face when he was lingering in the Captain's Bar at the Mandarin. He remembered the tousled, good-natured young lawyer with whom he had worked more than five years before.

The Navel Bar at Wanchai was not his scene, but he allowed the other to choose. The name was not a comic misnomer designed to attract American seamen on leave: the navel was part of the business.

It was likely that the close contenders in the street were not short of their own supply of navels: the Crazy Horse Bar, the Cave Bar, the Ocean Bar, the Suzy Wong Bar, the Country and Western Bar, the Diamond Bar....

The interior made no great impact on the customer because it disappeared in a haze of pink, blue and green lights into an eventual darkness of high leather seats arranged in booths. A darkness from which laughter and giggles and occasional raucous shouts came. Pretty girls showing much of leg and breast floated past. Eyes feline and predatory watched without appearing to watch from the outer darkness.

The centre of the bar was a gleaming confection of bottles and glasses and coloured lights, enclosing a huge circular

couch. On the couch reclined the near-naked beauties who poured the drinks and gave the place its name. Their clothing consisted of a tiny silver cap on each nipple and a black rag on a string round the waist. A moderate tip in addition to the price of the drink would bring a breast or a buttock within reach of a stroking hand.

As Jim Gray's eyes became more accustomed to the darkness, the mysterious haze of scented bodies evaporated. The lights were dusty and cracked. The matting on the floor was rimed with filth. A smell of drains penetrated the cologne. The ice for drinks was chipped off a huge hunk which lay on the floor behind the bar table. The floor girls, laced in behind their brassières and tights, were not nearly as choice as the two couched samples; behind a thin smile was the Oriental resignation of their aged but unlined faces. A pelvis which wiggled a foot away from him was under the particular impression that heavy, grizzled men with startled expressions were an easy catch.

Gray reached for his drink and turned away. 'I don't profess to understand all the ramifications,' he said to Macy. 'All I know is that Libra are putting up the fifty million dollars of assets to make this consortium the biggest thing in this part of the world. It's Harry Beech's idea. He sees the Pacific Basin as the kind of forum of the future, and he wants to control all transport by land, sea and air, or at least a pretty big slice of it.'

'It's not a new idea.'

'Nope, but he's carrying it out.'

'He has one plane less to do it with....'

Gray was jarred back to the crash, the March report, and the fact that Macy was the man who had been sent out to meet Mrs March. He had to be careful.

'This isn't exactly a place to talk shop,' Gray said, more relieved than embarrassed as he felt the light brushing of a girl's body behind him.

'What did you think of Mrs March?' Macy persisted.

'I was glad she wasn't too hurt....'

'I guess she told you that I was coming out, or someone was coming out from First Bankers to get March's papers....'

'I can't recall now what she said ... can we leave it?' Gray gave perfunctory attention to the pelvis which was still in the close vicinity, more to avoid the dark, intelligent eyes that were examining him. He might be discouraging Macy too much. He bought another round of double whiskies to give himself time to reflect.

'I see you're blaming the control tower for the crash.'

'Oh that's newspaper publicity. I don't necessarily go along with it. I'm here to find out the facts.' He tried to sound more encouraging, fearing he had gone too far in the other direction.

Macy was obviously not going to leave him alone, although he seemed to remain in a perfectly good humour.

'It was an old plane, I believe?'

'I wouldn't say old. It was near time for major renovation.'

'Near? I heard it was over time....'

Gray wondered whether the flicker of fear which involuntarily crossed his solid features was discernible in the dim light. He plucked his glass from the counter to his lips, and rolled his eyes in search of the pelvis.

'I said——' Macy bored in.

'I don't know what you mean——'

'What does it matter....?'

'I want to get out of here,' Gray said tersely.

'The bar?' Macy said, finishing his drink.

'The Island.'

The view from Richard West's suite at the Mandarin was a complete picture of the busy neck of water where the passenger ferries cross between the Island and Kowloon, churning hurriedly, crammed with people, threading in and out between the sluggish junks sailing down the channel.

'We have a dog sniffing us out,' West said.

'Not a bloodhound, I hope.' Cooper laughed flippantly.

Jim Gray watched a liner moving through the channel, framed exactly in the long window, as though shot on colour film, and grimaced at Cooper. 'It's no joke. He's suspicious....'

'Oh, big surprise!' Cooper said. 'You mean he actually suspects us of taking the March report off him? How strange!'

'I didn't know you were going to speak to him, Jim,' West said. 'Are you sure you were careful?'

'Of course I was bloody well careful. I didn't even know then the man had been beaten up and robbed by us, did I?'

'No,' Cooper said with mock weariness, 'all you knew was that we'd beaten him by pinching the first part of the March report.'

'We had a few drinks, that's all... He hinted about the certification for the plane, seemed to know it had been——'

'Fixed——' Cooper said. 'Very clever, but not very useful.'

Richard West was irritated: 'Okay, Cooper. There'll be plenty of time to be cocky when we've pulled this deal off. Not a cloud in the sky! Everything fixed with Oriental Freight ... and then we have this crash....'

'And now Macy,' Gray said. 'He's a cloud. A cloud no bigger than a man's hand....'

'Who is this person?' Cooper asked.

'Used to be in legal in the States. He knows a lot about Libra ... but nothing to hurt us. He's a drop-out. I phoned a contact of mine in New York. Has a practice doing welfare law. How he got this assignment I don't know.' And West paused, the assertive lines of his face, which usually dominated, puckering momentarily. 'Coming here to pick up a few papers. Can't see why one of their regular executives couldn't do it....'

'Or one of their regular attorneys,' Cooper said. 'Who cares?'

'Seems to me we've harmed ourselves by attacking Macy,' Gray said. 'He won't leave us alone now.'

'Jim, you don't stop a deal like we have with First Bankers because a man gets knocked over in Hong Kong. What First Bankers want to know are the facts that make their deal right or wrong. Macy isn't in a position to help.' West spoke as if he was rehearsing an argument, convincing himself.

'Now if First Bankers had seen the March report——' Cooper began portentously, 'if that plane *hadn't* crashed, where would we be?'

'Nobody has seen the March report except me. It doesn't exist. It's been destroyed,' West said. 'It's the work of a very clever and constructive financial brain, working from known data. March never found out a thing. But he studied hard and

thought a lot. As a result he produced a set of questions that are ...' Richard West thought for a word.

'Embarrassing,' suggested Cooper.

'But every company has its embarrassments ...' West said. He smiled. He had thought it through. His two subordinates could feel his certainty.

Macy was crossing the foyer of the Hilton with barely enough time to pack his bags. A telephone call, a few inquiries. A decision. He had hastily read the messages waiting for him at the desk. Richard West had called three times, and was asking him to call back. It was no use bothering with Richard West. At least not at the moment. The other message was from Anne March, asking him to see her before he went. He had shifted his flight ahead. There would be no time. It was easier this way. No goodbyes, only a pleasant memory. Anne March was a delightful woman, but not for him.

He was five or six yards away when he realized he was walking into a reception. Richard West, plump, pressed, dapper and smiling, was waiting for him, blocking the route to his room by either lift or stairs.

'Good morning, Steve!' West held out his arms exuberantly.

Macy stopped. 'I'm in a hurry, West——'

'If I offended you last time, I'm terribly sorry——'

'You didn't offend me. You were busy then. I'm busy now. That's all.'

'You're heading back, then...? I understand Mrs March is going today.'

'Nope. I'm not going back——'

'I must have got the wrong information from the desk ... they said you were checking out today.' West smiled his smoothest.

'That's right,' Macy snapped. 'I'm going to London.'

West's eyebrows shot up, but he was too experienced to betray discomfort. 'A further assignment from your very rich client?'

'No. The same assignment. I guess First Bankers will be writing to Libra in London, asking them to let me have every facility——'

'I don't understand, Steve. What do you want with us?' West queried lightly.

'Excuse me, I'll have to go,' Macy retorted offhandedly. He started up the stairs. 'I'll be stitching up a few of the holes left by the disappearance of the March report.'

West was abandoned at the foot of the stairs, gobbling like a turkey. It would do no harm to alarm West. Libra might get tense and show him all the more quickly where their weaknesses were.

He hadn't much time to work. Klein was tepid and Prescott had little confidence in him. He might yet be a pawn in Prescott's game with his Board of directors.

Macy was travelling light. He slipped his spare suit into his suitcase, threw the packets of laundered shirts on top, and went through the drawers throwing out socks and underclothes.

Libra had ransacked March's papers, and they had thumped him on the head in the lift. He was determined to get to the bottom of it in his report. But precisely how?

He finished packing, put his bag by the door, threw the light raincoat over it and made one last tour of the room. He found his razor on the bathroom shelf, and was tucking it away in a sidepocket of his suitcase when he remembered that the pages he had removed from March's case were in the dresser.

He took them from the bottom drawer where he had discarded them. He flicked through them. They were Libra documents, some of which he had already seen—schedules of assets and valuations: land, buildings, machinery, ships, aeroplanes.

His eye caught something familiar as he riffled through, the letters G-AMAC; they rang a bell....

It was a reference to a plane on a long list of planes, a Boeing 727. Of course, it was the crash plane ... he was almost certain.

He sat down on the bed and lit a cigarette. She was valued at nearly three and a half million dollars.

And then there was one thing he remembered from the March papers which had been stolen from him: March had made a note of the same plane, and he had put alongside it

'six years, 500,000 dollars'. The boffin who was examining the wreck had remarked that she needed an overhaul, and Gray, the Ops. Manager, had more or less confirmed it.

Macy removed the half-bottle of Scotch that he kept handily near the top of his case and poured a heavy shot into a glass. Suppose G-AMAC was shown at roughly seven times more than she was worth in the schedule ...?

He gulped the raw liquor. The purpose of the schedule was to prove to First Bankers that Libra shares were worth what Libra said they were worth. The values were supposed to be near right ... but if they were phoney, First Bankers, who were going to acquire a big slab of Libra stock in the consortium deal, would be getting a bum deal.

'It's a start,' Macy said out loud to himself. 'I'll have another drink on it.' There were plenty of other planes to be checked out.

PART TWO
BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

15

London

Ernie Tidy surveyed his territory and sniffed loudly. The sniff resounded in the deserted foyer of the Libra building with its chequered marble floor and crystal chandelier.

He shivered. The heating system never worked well in the early morning. He flicked on a row of switches on one of the pillars. The chandelier came to life, and an illuminated map of the world which occupied one entire wall.

'Sun's up,' he said aloud, facing the map. 'Get ready for another day.' The map showed, diagramatically, the nerve centre of the Libra organization at Pall Mall, of which he was Chief Messenger, with a network of lines of communication extending across Europe and the East to America and Australia.

Ernie Tidy, having caused the sun to rise on the world, spent a little time examining its geography; then he turned and marched back to the small desk beside a pillar near the street entrance. He straightened his pencils, tore a used sheet off his notepad, and wrote the date on a fresh sheet.

He sat down at the desk, picked up the phone and dialled two numbers.

'Mr West's office,' a woman's voice answered almost immediately.

'Mornin', Miss Drake. You're in early.'

'Good morning, Ernie. I don't have anything for you now, but I'll want you about ten.'

'Okay. Just checkin'. Mr West's back today, right?'

'He was due in over the weekend.'

'Where from this time? Montreal, Mesopotamia—he goes there like goin' round the corner. You know last summer when the Missus and me went to that Libra hotel on the Costa Brava was the first time we was ever out of England.'

Ernie recognized the black car drawing up to the entrance. From his seat he could see through the glass doors to the

street. A plump, youngish executive was extricating himself from a rear seat. 'It's 'im,' he said, and hung up the phone without ceremony.

Richard West bounded up the steps. He was pleased to see the messenger at his desk so early; it soothed his sense of orderliness.

'Mornin', Mr West. Good journey?'

'Good morning, Tidy. Yes. See the property manager about the heating here, will you?' He was into the waiting lift and on his way up before the man could get to him with unnecessary questions.

As the lift rose to the tenth floor, West quickly brushed the shoulders of his dark suit and ran his fingers over his chin. He had shaved badly and dressed quickly.

On the tenth floor he emerged to face Helen Drake. He knew she would be there before him. She was as crisp and composed as ever. Her look assessed him. She skipped a greeting. 'Mrs West's on the line.'

Richard West went past her, into his office. She half turned, about to speak, but he went on so she shrugged and went on with her typing.

He threw his briefcase on a chair and crossed directly to the phone.

Deirdre West's voice came to him as a thin wail at first, which only gradually sorted itself into words. 'I've got a cut on my back ... where you pushed me against the screen ... and my face, my eye....'

'I lost my temper. I'm sorry. *I'm sorry.*'

'You bastard!'

The line went dead. He sighed. 'Oh shit!'

He was startled by a contemptuous chuckle from behind him: someone was in the room whom he'd not noticed. He jerked round.

A long, thin and rather cadaverous man reclined in one of the deep leather chairs at the back of the room. He was immaculately dressed in lightweight brown tweeds. 'Personal problems too, Richard?' he said, and there was a critical undertone in the bantering manner.

'What the hell are you doing here, Challis? My secretary didn't tell me you were here; I——'

'I don't suppose you gave her the chance to tell you, old boy. I called your house this morning, and it was nice to learn you'd already left for the office. Such devotion. I thought I'd come here. I beat you by a few minutes. You're looking tired. Another late night? Gambling? I know how Deirdre loves the tables.'

'She can afford it,' West said, taking his seat behind the desk.

'But you can't afford it, Richard; not if it upsets your work,' Challis said, coming forward to throw himself down carelessly in a nearer chair.

Richard West was happier looking down at the man from across his desk, from the Managing Director's chair. 'Gambling has nothing to do with it.'

'Is she giving you trouble?'

Challis was no confidant, but he knew Deirdre well. 'She always has,' West admitted.

'What do you expect?' Challis bantered. 'Rich, cultured, beautiful, what more do you want? You surely don't expect her to be good as well?'

'She's my wife.'

'She's bored.'

West struggled with a surge of anger. 'What do you want?'

'I want to know how the Hong Kong business went.'

West's composure returned. In this area he was in control. 'We're in the clear.'

'Good, because there's been a bit of hesitation with First Bankers. They've said it was because they couldn't get the report they anticipated from——'

'From John March. The executive who was killed in the crash.'

'Yes. You mentioned his name to me when you called from Hong Kong ... I wonder if that's the real reason for First Bankers' delay. Harry's gone to New York to sort them out. He had to go himself. I had a most peevish call from Prescott of First Bankers. He complained none of them had ever met Harry. All sorts of silly things. Damned old woman. Anyway, we're all ready.'

Richard West didn't reply. He didn't want to talk to Philip Challis; his mind kept returning to the drunken scene in the small hours of the morning with Deirdre: her clawing at him when words were insufficient, the blows, her fall, the bedroom as it emerged in the horrible light of morning, the broken lamps, Deirdre's sodden sleep, the bloodstains on the sheets....

The sunken, dark eyes of Philip Challis were watching expectantly, fixed on him. 'Well, what was in the March report?'

'March was much more astute than anybody realized. I'd hardly met him myself; I had no idea First Bankers put much faith in what he was doing He seemed to me over-earnest, and perhaps a bit stupid, and certainly not very important. But he managed to uncover a discrepancy between our assets and our valuations. He hadn't precisely pinpointed anything wrong, but he'd have worried First Bankers into asking a lot of questions.'

So the crash was devilish luck for us.'

Richard West leaned forward on his forearms, warmed a little to the story. 'It was, and not the only piece of luck. I don't think anybody thought March was carrying anything important until his widow, who went to Hong Kong, told Jim Gray that First Bankers were so concerned they were sending a man to the Colony to get his papers.'

'And you quite naturally felt you should have them, rather than First Bankers,' Challis said.

'Exactly.'

Challis confirmed the sleekness of his cap of black hair with his fingertips. 'If this deal doesn't go through, if there's a hitch——'

'Don't get nervous,' West said, watching Helen Drake's breasts move under her sweater as she set two cups of coffee on the desk.

Challis was impervious to the presence of a woman. He picked up the cup and sipped. 'Awful,' he frowned. 'I'm not nervous, Richard. I merely want you to remember that we have an ailing giant on our hands. Both of our reputations are caught up with it. If the giant dies ... if the giant lives,

if it gets the injection it needs, we shall both be able to live happily ever after.'

'Why should you care so much? You're a merchant banker. You can take the loss of every penny you have in Libra. It's different for me. All my money is in Libra shares. I'm the boss. If Libra goes down it takes me with it.'

The dark eyes glowed in their deep sockets. 'You're a very new boy, Richard. Harry couldn't have created Libra without me. The challenge. The excitement. That's why I care. I want Libra to survive because it's partly mine. If the merger with First Bankers goes through, Libra will be in the clear; there will be enough fat for it to live on for many a day....'

Richard West gulped the coffee; it was bitter, and strong. He lit his first cigarette of the day and felt easier as he exhaled the smoke. Challis seemed in no hurry.

'I believe Cooper's done a good job in Hong Kong,' Challis said.

'Not bad.'

'A bit grudging.'

'He's going to make a mistake,' West said.

'You don't like him.'

'He's an executive,' West said flatly. 'I don't have to like or dislike him.'

'Don't let your personal feelings interfere,' Challis persisted.

West crushed the cigarette end, half smoked, in the tray. His mouth was raw. His head ached slightly. 'Are you sure you should be talking of likes or dislikes? I believe Cooper is a very close friend of yours.'

West found his mark, and instantly regretted it. Challis's bony face turned to stone; his lips drew back mechanically in a sardonic smile.

Philip Challis, a powerful ally, or a powerful enemy, left the room without a further word.

Ernie Tidy went down the front steps with Philip Challis, and saved the chauffeur a job by opening the door of the limousine. He was quite used to the comings and goings of the haughty Mr Philip Challis who never so much as recognized him.

As Tidy ascended the steps he saw, through the glass, a familiar figure sitting on his desk, tousled, in an old white raincoat. He pushed through the doors, and it took him a moment to recollect before he returned the cheerful grin. 'Why, Mr Macy. It's you. I never recognized. How long?'

'Centuries, Ernie. Glad to see you're keeping the old place ticking over.'

'Not many sit on my desk swingin' their feet, Mr Macy.'

'I hope not, Ernie. Very bad habit. I was looking for Brooks, Ernie. Where is he now?'

'Ah. There's a thing. He went, very sudden. Very brilliant financial man Mr Brooks was, I hear. Very.' Ernie Tidy shook his head mysteriously.

'Why did he go?'

Ernie put his head on one side, pulled at the prongs on his waistcoat and assumed his most sagacious expression. He weighed weighty factors. 'Ah. There's a question!'

Macy tried another angle. 'I'm over from New York for a few days and I thought I'd see a few old friends from Libra. If you can help me, that's great——'

'It's not that, Mr Macy. There's some things——'

'Fine,' Macy said, slipping off the desk, slightly hurt.

'Now, Mr Macy, don't be like that. It's difficult. That's all. You know I hear a lot of rumours——'

'I'm not asking you to spread rumours. I'm asking you to tell me where Mike Brooks is.'

Ernie came very close and wrinkled up his watery eyes. 'I can speak to you, Mr Macy,' he said. 'Young Mike Brooks was caught screwin' Mrs West in her husband's office!'

'Hell!'

Ernie was caught between the gravity of the news and his pleasure at imparting it. 'Beats me!' he muttered.

Macy passed his hand through his hair. 'Out of character,' he said. 'Might have been me. But not Mike....'

'You never can tell,' Ernie said sagely.

16

Linda Hall opened the balcony doors and let in the autumn wind that was stirring the trees; it was chilly.

She went to the edge of the balcony and sipped her whisky. She looked down from the quiet side of Bryanston Square into the garden. A nanny was romping with two well-dressed kids on the enclosed lawn.

It was good being home from work, alone, in the quiet and comfort of her own place; she didn't mind being alone.

She wasn't expecting anybody, so the buzzer startled her.

She swung the door open curiously, because the porter in the hall rang up all callers. She expected a neighbour. The puzzle was which.

It wasn't a neighbour. It was a man with a lined grin in a dirty white raincoat, a man with grey eyes that fixed you, in spite of the grin.

Linda Hall raised one eyebrow a little. She didn't smile or frown. 'How did you get in?'

'With the laundry.'

'The *clean* laundry,' she insisted.

'Still as sharp as ever.' He nodded, unwilling to take the game further.

'You're a cool bastard, drifting in after ... how long?'

'Four and a half years, almost to the week.'

She showed a first tinge of amusement, even pleasure. 'You remember well.'

'Are you going to call a policeman or ask me in?'

'I guess you can come in.' She stood aside.

'Say, this is quite a pad.' He stamped appreciatively on the heavy carpet and eyed the brocade chairs and mahogany tables. 'Your rich uncle die?'

'The company pay part of the rent.'

'Ah, Libra. The paternal Libra. You've done well. You must be managing director.'

'Head of personnel.'

'Do you think you could get a job, Madam, for a rather tottery lawyer named Macy?'

'You fool,' she replied, smiling genuinely.

'You don't look a day older.'

She was pleased with herself before him. The expensive cashmere woollen dress of sea-blue clung to her compact figure, even gave it a voluptuous roundness, and fullness, which it did not have when she stripped. But the pleasure was short.

'What do you want?' she asked, turning to him, blocking his advance to the couch.

'To see you . . .' he waved his hand vaguely.

'We don't have social visits, Steve. Not even after four years.'

'And a half.'

'Goodbye, Steve.' She swung round him and headed for the front door.

'Surely we can talk, Linda.'

'Steve, it's over. *Over. Finished.*'

His ease had gone. He was bewildered, confused by her hardness. 'You still hold it against me.'

'What?'

'The . . .'

She was contemptuous. 'You can't even say it, can you? The abortion, Steve. The abortion. Not nice. Not nice at all.'

'It was just one of those things that happened.'

'I nearly died. That was something that nearly happened, but not the worst thing. The worst thing was the months of worry, of wanting the child and not wanting it, and knowing that if it were aborted, an irrevocable step had been taken between us to change our relationship, to ruin it.'

'It all happened a long time ago.'

'But it happened to us. Nothing can be the same.'

'Not if you won't have it.'

'"Can't", "won't" and "shan't" don't come into it: I don't feel anything for you.'

'Okay.' He was cowed. His head hung down awkwardly and he couldn't look at her. 'I'm sorry.'

'That's the thing you're best at—being sorry. I spent a

year after the operation holding you off till you left the company. Sending your letters back unopened. Hanging up the telephone on you. Avoiding your phoney business conferences. You were always sorry.'

'I cared for you.'

The words checked her, the pale face, the staring eyes. She used a softer tone. 'If you don't have any business with me, go, please.'

He nodded agreement. 'I do.'

'What?'

'I want to know where Mike Brooks is.'

'I've no idea. If we have a forwarding address at the office, I'll let you know.'

'Thanks. I'm staying at the Inn on the Park.'

She could ask him to have a drink after her earlier fierceness. He looked older, the lines deeper, the figure more bony. She smoothed her chin, confident of the odd agelessness of her face, the neat, dark hair with its undisturbed waves.

'Have a drink,' she said, 'and then you must go.'

'No. I'd better not,' he said gently.

'What are you doing in London, Steve?'

'I've been asked to complete a report about Libra started by a man who was killed in the crash in Hong Kong.'

'John March, yes. I met him. And I suppose, if you've taken over, we'll meet again.'

'I hope so.'

'I don't.'

'I thought Brooks might help me. I was astounded to hear from Tidy, the messenger, that he had been caught with Mrs West of all people.'

'I'm not surprised to hear anything of Deirdre. But I don't know the facts about Brooks. He left suddenly, that's all, and I found a new man.'

'Let me know about Brooks.' He moved towards the door.

She followed. 'Isn't it a little indirect to see Brooks? I mean why not see the new man, the accountants, the auditors? It can all be arranged.'

'I'm curious when a clever finance man loses his job suddenly for an uncharacteristic lapse.'

'Do you mean you're curious about Brooks, as a person, a friend? Or are you suggesting something else?'

'I'm not suggesting anything. I'm only poking round.'

He gave her that crooked smile, drew heavily on his cigarette, and went.

She was suddenly alone; and only when she'd poured it did she realize that the whisky was twice as deep as usual.

Philip Challis contemplated the hideous marble fireplace, dominant ornament of the Grafton Club's historic smoking room. Prime ministers and even kings had paused before this object, with its whirling effects in red-flecked stone.

'I believe your father was a member here,' his companion said. Anthony Poynton had gulped a huge lunch. He was slumped in a chair opposite Challis, the light glinting on his glasses, like the fat boy at school, trying hard to be agreeable.

'And my grandfather,' Challis replied distantly. Membership of the Grafton was not open to first-generation politicians in shiny suits who shovelled their food.

Poynton fingered the roll of ease protruding over his belt. 'A delightful lunch, Challis.'

The food at the club was vile, it was always vile; but Challis hadn't fed the politician for the pleasure of eating. 'Have a cognac.'

'Ah, yes.'

Poynton was glazed, and ready to be committed to Challis's business. 'Libra will get government support anyway. It's a big foreign exchange earner. But it doesn't do any harm to have a few friends at court.' He passed the smile which he gave Poynton on to the aged waiter who appeared to take his order.

'Of course,' Poynton said eagerly.

Poynton was to be one of the friends at court. He was fortyish, skilful at getting a good press by throwing bones to the underdog, a man of growing influence, a member of the government party, and not sufficiently well off to be able to avoid the enticements of Libra: Challis was sure he had chosen well.

'Have one of these cigars. I don't often smoke, but I find them refreshing.'

The old waiter bent over with a box. He winked at Challis. 'Your father used to smoke these.'

Challis tolerated him. Aged club waiters are a special breed, with special latitude.

Poynton puffed awkwardly, with the fat boy's enthusiasm. 'I'll be glad to help in any way I can.'

'We want you to look after our interests occasionally. Perhaps see the minister and other members on behalf of Libra.'

'I have my other duties, of course——'

Challis was easy. 'I don't think there'll be any conflict. It'll do your career good. We're powerful enough to make it worthwhile for you. A directorship, naturally.'

Somewhere beneath the layers of fat was an alert beast which gave a glint of its presence deep in the bespectacled eyes and then disappeared. 'It sounds very attractive,' Poynton said.

'It is. Your influence and prestige will be enhanced, and we'll know our views are represented with a lot of people that matter.'

Poynton wriggled. 'Will there be any er—er—directors' shares?'

'Certainly. And directors' fees. And the opportunity to get in on the ground floor for one or two bargains.'

'It seems a lot for what I'm being asked to do.'

'We think it's worth while. We value your experience as a potential Board member. You won't be a passenger.'

Poynton rolled the cognac round his mouth, and became wary as it burnt its way down his throat. 'Of course I can't allow anything to conflict with my—er—my er—principles, my duty to the Party——'

Challis assented; there was no point in protesting too much. He had hooked Poynton easily and it was only a matter of bringing the great blubbery fish, fightless, gently alongside.

'What did you mean exactly about "bargains" ... I'm afraid I don't have money to throw around on the stock market,' Poynton asked, mopping his brow.

'My dear Tony— May I call you that?' Challis replied, assuming the intimacy as though Poynton was his subordinate. 'Your credit will be good as director of one of the biggest

public companies in the country. My bank will advance you anything you need for investment purposes.'

Challis observed the spark of light which flashed and disappeared in the depths of the politician's eyes at the vision of unlimited credit.

'Let me explain,' he said. 'In the first place, Libra was an airline and travel business——'

'Started by Harry Beech,' Poynton said.

'Have you met him?'

'Never.'

'You will. I've known him since the New York days, more than ten years ago. He's a strange mixture. Brought up in a circus. A hustler. A cultured man. A formidable chess player. A Jew, or at least a member of the race. I don't think he's religious. His family originally came from Odessa. He can even play the violin a little. I suppose his particular genius is that he's a master salesman: I think he's the most persuasive man I ever met.'

Poynton gleamed with anticipation, but he was listening carefully.

'You said Libra was an airline at first ...?'

'Outwardly, it still is,' Challis replied. 'Five or six years ago we bought a number of companies whose names were more important to us than their profits: small investment and insurance companies. Today, through them, we control about 2,000 million pounds of public money, here and in the United States.'

'So the character of Libra has changed?'

'You could say that, Tony, or you could say we've diversified to protect our original airline/travel investment. It's words. In real life we manage a lot of other people's money. We make a nice profit doing it, but that's nothing to the muscle we pack in the stock market.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that you ought to be able to imagine how easy it is for us to gobble up nice fat little companies capitalized at ten million or so.'

Challis talked without any particular stress. He might have been describing a casual tennis match.

'You mean by buying and selling the shares with public money?'

'I do, Tony. It's not wrong. Warehousing shares is not illegal. As a matter of fact it's a recognized method. We hold shares quietly in one of our trusts, and when Libra's ready to pounce, we move the shares out to gain control and a profit.'

'It is frowned upon, I think,' Poynton ventured, his balding head shining.

'Indeed, yes,' Challis smiled, 'but in that peculiarly English style of duality which disapproves that which it does. The City has to disapprove, Tony. If the City didn't disapprove people would say the City was bad, and someone would change the law. Oh yes, the City certainly *has* to disapprove warehousing and a dozen other naughty things, because that is the only way to retain the freedom to go on doing them.'

The youthful enthusiasm to reform the country had been worn away by the narrowness of a parliamentary income over the years. Poynton hauled himself to his feet, weighed down by the solidity of a directorship in Libra. He proffered three plump fingers. 'Very good of you, Challis. Superb Cognac.'

Challis uncurled himself lazily and did not rise to shake hands. 'You'll accept then?' he said seriously, well knowing the answer.

'Of course.'

The two parted; the chubby, all-serving politician trotting toward the smoking room doors.

Challis called him back. 'Oh by the way, Tony, I never mentioned it, but the name of the company we are interested in is Oriental Freight. It's quoted in London. A few shares at the present price will pay off nicely in two months.'

'As I said, I don't have the money.'

'Don't worry. I'll get them for you. A first instalment of that loan I mentioned.'

The eyes burned briefly with something like alarm before Poynton's face was submerged in smiles. 'Thank you very much, Challis, I——'

'Don't mention it,' Challis said. 'It's no more than the kind of information you'll have access to as a director.'

Poynton quivered appreciatively and walked out of the

room, leaving the merchant banker alone with the heavy, malign furniture, the reek of aged wood and cigar smoke. He addressed the old waiter, the one other person left in the room, across the wastes of furniture.

'I'm expecting Mr Cooper to come in from Hong Kong, George. Has he arrived yet?'

17

Macy was in bed. The lamp cast a white pool of light round him. He drew thoughtfully on a cigarette and thumbed the thin file of papers he had collected from March.

He picked up the large whisky he had placed on the bedside table and sipped. The hands of his new watch crept towards twelve. It was six in the afternoon in New York.

The phone rang in the muffled stillness of the room.

'Your call from New York, Mr Macy.'

'Put them on—hullo——' It was Klein.

'What next, Steve?'

'I'm going to check out the planes March listed, see where they're operating and what they're worth.'

Silence on the line. Macy could hear Klein breathing. Klein was the restrained sort of man who expressed disapproval by silences.

'Don't see the value of that approach, Steve,' Klein said, finally.

Macy tossed a mouthful of the raw whisky down. 'Obviously March was concerned about asset values, his notes show it,' Macy replied curtly.

'He may have been, but I think you'll find it was a peripheral concern What we wanted to know from him, and what we want to know from you, is whether the company's sound.'

'Godammit! That's what I'm finding out!'

'Every company jigs its asset valuations, Steve. You know that. We expect it. It makes little difference, usually, to the basic soundness of the enterprise.' Klein sounded unconcerned, weary.

'Listen. Some bastard slugged me in a lift in Hong Kong

and took the March papers. That I know. Why? Why?' Macy swallowed the rest of the spirit.

Klein was unmoved. 'I think what happened was capable of another interpretation. The thief took your money, didn't he? Don't get too personally involved, Steve. Make a more—a more conventional approach. See the Financial Controller——'

'Libra fired the last one, and I intend to find out why.'

Klein continued as though Macy had not interrupted him, but with the necessary correction. 'See the present finance man. See the auditors. Have a word with Richard West if there are any queries. That's all. Then come home. OK?'

'Sure,' Macy replied automatically.

'Get as many notes as you can, and when you get back we'll put them into a report. Don't trouble about the format of the report. You and I can fix that up when you get back.'

'You mean you'll write it up for me.'

'I didn't say that, Steve. I know what the Board of First Bankers want, what Ullman in particular wants. It's only right I should check the presentation.'

Klein's voice had dropped away to a quiet, hurt tone.

But Macy was not going to let him off. 'You call seeing a Libra director and the auditors an investigation capable of producing a useful report?'

'Adequate for our purposes.'

'I'm starting to wonder what your purposes are,' Macy snapped back. 'Do you just want a dozen typewritten pages of rubbish to satisfy Ullman, or do you want a real investigation and report?'

Klein came back unruffled, but loud and firm. 'Steve, if you don't do what I want, I'll dismiss you.'

It was Macy's turn to be silent.

Klein went on more softly when Macy did not attempt to respond. 'By the way, Harry Beech is coming here for a meeting with the First Bankers Board on Wednesday.'

'Maybe the Board will love him so much when they meet him that they won't need a report.'

'I hope so,' Klein laughed, 'and from what I know of the man, that's quite possible.'

* * *

Linda Hall drove fast along the M1 to Luton. She refrained from glancing at the man strapped into the high-backed seat beside her. She could smell him; tobacco and the slight scent of after-shave lotion.

Her eye dropped momentarily to the speedometer. The Jensen was cruising at well over seventy.

'Jim Gray runs all our flight side from Luton,' she said. 'We have a very big operation there. I can't think why you're interested, though....'

'How else would I get a pleasant drive with you all to myself,' Macy replied.

'Sure,' Linda replied sceptically. She flicked the wheel and dived inside a car crawling at sixty in the fast lane.

'Jesus!' Macy exclaimed as the car swayed back to its previous line.

'Nice machine,' he said. 'Yours?'

She shook her head negatively.

'Whose?'

Now she did look at him, very quickly, and caught the strong profile, grim-jawed. He was prying again. After all these years, he had to know. He always had to know everything; it was one of the things about him that spoiled their relationship. She turned the question over.

It really didn't matter. 'Harry's,' she said.

'Oh ... Harry. Harry Beech, the world's youngest old tycoon, or is it oldest young tycoon?'

'He's a bit younger than you,' Linda replied.

'You're not all that much younger yourself, from what I can remember.'

'You always were uncharitable about my age,' Linda said ruefully.

'Your age never mattered a damn to me. If I played on it, I suppose it was because I thought it hurt.'

'You wanted to hurt me, huh?' Linda asked.

'It's sometimes the only way when somebody is hurting you.'

'Like animals.'

'Ours was fundamentally a relationship between two animals,' Macy said.

'Maybe it was,' she mused, almost to herself, recalling for an instant the wild nights of passion and violent argument, as with the other half of her mind she controlled the speeding car.

James Gray rose beefily from his chair, and Macy thought he saw a certain uneasiness lurking behind the rugged grin. Gray lunged a handshake at Macy.

'It's good to see you, Macy.'

'I thought I'd better see the whole works while I'm here.'

'Good. We have conducted tours for school parties.'

'I better join one.'

When the laughter from the pleasantries had passed, Linda and Gray were left looking at him expectantly.

'I'd like to see the operations room,' Macy said.

Gray hesitated. Linda looked at him. The answer came back almost immediately.

'A pleasure,' Gray said.

They left Gray's office, with its splendid backdrop view over the airfield, and went to an enclosed, high-ceilinged room, brilliantly lit, several times bigger.

The centre of the room was occupied by a bureau of desks equipped with telephones, intercommunication systems and television monitors. A wide space was left between the bureau and each of the four walls. The walls were covered by a series of huge and complex charts.

'The movements of all Libra aircraft are shown here,' Gray said.

'Do you have any dealings with a company called Cobral?' Macy asked irrelevantly.

'No,' Gray said.

'Do you know the name?'

'I don't recall it.'

Gray met his eyes and looked quickly away.

A white-coated man approached them. 'This is Mr Paton,' Gray said. 'In charge of charts.'

Macy scanned the lists of air registrations on the charts, but he could not identify any as being those on the list he

had taken from the dead March, and he had committed to memory.'

'Are these all the planes you have?' Macy asked, rechecking the lists.

It was true. None of the planes on the March list were mentioned in the operations charts.

'These are all the operational planes,' Paton replied. 'Isn't it enough?'

'Too many, sometimes, to keep track of,' Gray said.

'What are you looking for, Steve?' Linda asked, seeing his close examination of the charts.

Macy ignored her, still studying. 'What about non-operational planes?.'

'Those that have been withdrawn for major overhauls are listed over there,' Paton replied, pointing to a board on another wall.

Macy examined the board. It yielded nothing.

'Don't you have any other planes anywhere else in the world?' he asked.

'No,' Gray said. 'Right at this minute, all the planes listed here are scattered everywhere, all over the globe. You see this for example,' he pointed to the wall. 'This is a 747 Boeing on charter from Dallas to St Louis.'

'What are you getting at, Steve?' Linda tried again.

'If you tell me what you want . . .' Gray began.

'Do you keep all the documentation for each plane here? I mean details of ownership, insurance, registration.'

'No. The papers are kept at head office,' Gray said.

'But you must have logs, details of servicing, air permits and so on.'

'The planes carry their own,' Gray said.

Macy persisted. 'Surely you must run a duplicate system here. How else would you know when flight checks are required?'

Gray was reluctant. 'We keep some details here, yes.'

'Can we see them?'

Gray was silent for a moment. 'Are you sure this is part of your brief. . . ?'

'If you don't want to show me . . .'

'I'm not supposed to let anyone look into our records,' Gray said defensively.

But Gray wavered, and looked to Linda Hall for help. She frowned suspiciously. Mr Paton stared past them at his charts, blinking obliviously.

Macy did not force the issue. 'If that's the way you want it,' he replied gently.

'Well, I suppose you can see,' Gray said, perplexed. 'I can't imagine what it's got to do with——'

'With what?' Macy asked.

'With your report on Libra operations,' Gray said. 'I mean, it's a matter of accounts isn't it? Money. Banks. Securities. All that. This is technical stuff here,' Gray said, dismissing the whole room with a gesture, and leading them into an adjoining room.

'These cabinets,' Gray said, 'contain our aircraft records. All the information is computerized. All that you have to do is to watch the charts. The computer automatically prints out any warning—say a time limit for servicing, or a mileage limit. It comes up on the chart, and we take action.'

Macy bent down to examine the identification cards on the front of each cabinet drawer. It would be a long job to check each card to see whether he could locate any of the March planes. Then he had an idea.

'Do you mean you can get a report on any particular plane any time you like, by pressing the buttons on the computer?'

'You can do that too,' Gray said, 'though it's not necessary very often.' He crossed to the small computer console with viewing screen, squinted at one of the cards on the drawers, and keyed the machine.

Almost simultaneously a table of figures was illuminated on the screen.

'Basic data,' Gray said. 'Mileage as at a certain date, estimated mileage as of now based on the plane's schedule, and so on.'

'What do you key to get the information?' Macy asked.

'For a general report, the air registration sign, and there are certain codes added to that to get different kinds of reports,' Gray said.

Macy stepped in front of the computer keyboard. 'Let me try,' he said.

Before any of them could say anything, he had. The words 'no programme' flashed on the screen.

'What did you try?' Gray asked, puzzled.

'G-AMAC,' Macy replied.

Gray smiled. 'This isn't a library. It's for aircraft we're either using or repairing.'

Macy cleared the computer and keyed again.

'No programme' flashed again.

'What this time?' Linda asked.

'G-AMAL,' Macy said.

'I'm afraid I can't claim to know every one of our air registrations,' Gray said heavily, 'but obviously that isn't one of them, or it would have come up on the screen. If you want to work it, get a code off one of the cards....'

Macy looked at one of the cards, but did not note the code. Instead he keyed another air registration he could remember from the March list. G-AVAL.

'No programme'.

'You must have got the code wrong,' Gray said.

'I guess I did,' Macy replied.

So there were some planes on the list of assets of Libra that weren't actually owned or operated by Libra.

'What's the matter Steve?' Linda interrupted.

'I was just thinking I'd better take a course in how to operate a computer.'

On the way back to London, Linda swerved the car off the M1 into a service area, without warning.

The Jensen squealed, and seemed to stand on its nose. Macy's seat-belt cut into his chest.

Linda fixed her dark eyes on him, studying. 'We split up a long time ago,' she said.

He unclipped his safety belt and leaned over her, resting the fingers of one hand lightly, yet confidently, on her breast.

He kissed her and she yielded unemotionally.

He stopped, halted by her closed eyes, her lack of feeling, the rubbery acquiescence.

He was taunted by the spicy smell of her.

He sat back. A flicker on the dashboard disturbed his eye. The rev. counter was trembling. The motor was running, almost silent.

'You still feel something,' he said, his voice croaky.

It was neither a question, nor a statement, but something in between.

She replied as though she had not heard him, but was answering a question asked a long time ago. 'You don't understand me.'

He grinned instantly. He had heard her say it a hundred times before.

She read his thoughts. 'However often I've told you, the significance of it never seems to be understood.'

He bent over her again.

First he kissed her cheek.

Then suddenly the peculiar musk scent of her filled his senses and his finger closed firmly on her breast, his lips crushed hers.

She pulled away. She did not look at him, but braced herself with her hands on the wheel.

She took a few seconds to recover. 'You make me feel like a photograph in a dirty magazine,' she said, licking her full lips, softening the bruising contact.

Then she thrust in the drive lever on the automatic transmission and stamped on the accelerator.

The Jensen seemed to leave the road as it surged forward, swaying and roaring on to the motorway.

'Hell! Mind that truck!' Macy shouted.

18

Macy went into the cocktail bar and ordered a double whisky. He made himself comfortable on a high stool at the end of the bar, out of the way of the crowd. He opened the letter which had been delivered to the hotel for him, and which he had just received from the desk clerk.

The paper was expensive, pale grey, printed with the street

address of Libra, but no name, in discreet embossed, dark blue letters. The rest of the letter was handwritten.

Pall Mall Tower,
Pall Mall,
London SW1.
Wednesday 10th August

Dear Steve,

I hope you will join my wife and me at the Cassandra Club in Tilney Street a few yards away from where you are—tonight for dinner. We shall probably play a little, too. We shall be there any time after eight thirty and you only need mention my name at the door.

With kind regards,

RICHARD WEST

The possibility of finding out about Mike Brooks was too good to miss. From Deirdre West herself.

Macy took a blank cable form from his pocket, and a pen. If he explained himself too much to Prescott or Klein, they would probably decline to co-operate. He had to get them to act without telling them why. A cable to them absolved him from explanations. He addressed the same cable separately to each of them:

PLEASE CARRY OUT AN INDEPENDENT CHECK OF THE VALIDITY OF THE AIR REGISTRATION AND INSURANCE ON EACH ONE OF THE AIRCRAFT SHOWN ON THE SCHEDULE OF ASSETS OF LIBRA SUPPLIED TO YOU IN SUPPORT OF THE LIBRA SHARE VALUATION
MACY

If Prescott or Klein carried out the check, they would be checking on at least two planes, G-AMAL and G-AVAL, which were not on the computer, and not apparently chartered operational planes, and not even under repair.

Macy tasted his drink and scanned the list of planes which he kept in his breast pocket. There they were, a Douglas DC8 and a Boeing 727.

If the planes were not registered or insured then they did

not exist ... and they figured in the list of assets at more than seven million dollars.

Macy turned round and scanned the bar without taking in any details of the smoothly dressed, leisured crowd. As he finished off the whisky he was thinking of a fraud which would buy the bar and all the people in it ten times over. Why stop at two planes? Ten were unaccounted for: fifty million dollars' worth.

The mind of Philip Challis was not at all on the affairs of the Emergency Committee for the Relief of African Refugees.

Challis leaned back restlessly on the hard seat.

Mr Anthony Poynton MP was speaking to the committee. He gleamed with soft enthusiasm, his voice disappearing into the wine-dark panels of the Great Committee Room at the House of Commons.

Lady Simpson in the chair maintained a smile fixed more by her cosmetics than her pleasure.

Challis suppressed a yawn and looked round at his companions. The academic went on scratching his hair; the civil servant was biting his nails, and the trade-union man was drawing girls on the blotting paper.

He looked at his watch. He was going to be late. He would have to leave. He excused himself and hurried out of the dark, echoing building.

The policeman at the door held open the door of the Rolls and saluted. The door clicked behind him and the big car headed for Soho.

Challis alighted in one of the garish streets.

'Wait for me at the corner. I'll only be a few minutes,' he told the chauffeur.

He plunged downstairs to a bar as the silent car swept by.

The room was ordinary enough. A little more elaborate than the street outside might have suggested: the carpet was thick, the furniture, chairs and small tables, tasteful. The lighting was subdued.

Challis's entrance evoked no surprise. Some nodded to him, men and women. The women were exquisite.

'I'm looking for Evan Cooper,' he said.

A woman indicated the direction. Challis moved round the L-shaped room.

He saw Cooper. Cooper was with a man. The man wore a long blue robe. He had his arm round Cooper, who looked serious, distraught almost, through the fringe of golden-white hair that had fallen forward.

Challis himself was pale. His face was emaciated. He watched for a moment and then went forward and put his hand on Cooper's arm.

The man in the blue robe disengaged himself and turned to Challis. The face that Challis saw was powdered white, with red-painted lips. Dark, poignant eyes fixed him.

'Come away,' Challis said.

Cooper did not move. His head hung down stupidly.

Challis took his arm and pulled him away. Cooper looked behind at the poignant painted face as he was dragged away like a naughty child.

The Rolls-Royce nosed towards Mayfair, enclosing the two men in a cocoon of silence. Challis was collapsed like a skeleton.

Only Cooper broke the silence: 'You're just jealous,' he said.

Challis and Cooper entered the Cassandra Club with perfect composure. Cooper's striking waves of fair hair were neatly in place; a little colour had even returned to Challis's high cheekbones. Both wore civilized smiles of faint amusement.

Challis quickly found Richard West and drew him away from the crowd at the roulette table.

'You don't look well, Challis,' West said.

'I've had some bad news.'

West stared hard at him.

'I've learned, in a roundabout way, that First Bankers have sent someone over here——'

West smiled. 'Oh that.'

'You should have told me.'

'It slipped my mind. Where did you hear it?'

'From New York. From First Bankers.'

'Don't worry,' Richard West said, pulling on his small cigar.

'You take it very casually.'

'There's no other way to take it. I can't do anything about the bloody man. He's here, and that's all there is to it.'

'Are you taking any measures to see he doesn't find out what March found out?'

'He won't do that,' West said. 'He's no financial man.'

'What's his background?' Challis asked. West's ease was infectious and he was inclined to let the inquiry go. He sought for Cooper in the crowd, but remained close to West.

'He's a former employee of Libra. He used to work in the legal department both here and in New York. That was five years ago.'

Challis returned his attention to West. 'So he knows a lot of senior staff? He knows a lot of Libra ways?'

'He does. But it won't help much.'

'He sounds very dangerous to me. Dangerous if he's got any horse-sense at all.'

'I wouldn't worry. Let me handle him my way. I've invited him here tonight. It's useful to keep close if we can. Friendly. I've assigned Deirdre to look after him. She's always friendly.'

Richard West rocked placidly on the balls of his feet and emitted a cloud of cigar smoke.

Philip Challis could see the figure his eyes had been seeking, and it was a comfort to watch the movements of the tall, blond young man across the crowded room.

Steve Macy was fascinated by the precision of the movements of the croupier who span the roulette wheel, raked in the losses and paid the wins with a stony expression that was entirely unaffected by the gasps of excitement from the table.

The chandeliers of the casino dropped a soft, jewelled light on the richly-dressed crowd.

'You're a gambler too, Steve.' Mrs Deirdre West patted the diamonds at her throat abstractedly as her green eyes caressed his face. 'I can tell.'

He had found it easy to let her carry him away from the others.

He looked down at the cascade of honey-coloured hair which broke over her shoulders, and the white net gown which showed more of her sun-tanned body than it covered.

'I don't gamble much,' he replied. 'I like sure things.'

'Sure things.' She giggled as she repeated the words, parting her lips and widening her eyes.

He could feel the pressure, the burning heat of her thigh against his as she steadied herself in the crush of bodies.

Looking sharply down he could see her nipples, pink as her lips, and feel one of them pressed hard against the front of his shirt.

Almost involuntarily, Macy looked round for the husband. Richard West was talking to a very tall, aristocratic-looking man with dark, smooth hair, over at the side of the room.

'Gambling's a matter of temperament, Steve. It's what we came here for. Come and play. Never mind Richard. He's not interested.'

She took his hand, squeezed it secretly, and led him to a blackjack table.

Most of those round the table were not interested in playing and Deirdre soon got a seat.

'Stand there, big boy,' she said, motioning Macy to a place close beside her, 'and bring me some luck.'

Steve Macy's eyes eventually rose from the fascinating contours falling from Mrs West's shoulders, and were taken by the dexterity of the young girl dealer.

The long-fingered silver nails turned the pack of cards, spread it, spliced the cards, and flicked them unerringly towards the players.

The girl made the thin pasteboards move at her will within a magnetized field which radiated from her finger nails.

Deirdre made up her mind quickly and signalled cards with a movement of her heavily-ringed hand.

At first she bought two tens and lost to the dealer's tens.

Then she lost three hands with seventeens and eighteens. She was not in the least discouraged, turning to Macy to chatter.

But her mind remained on the game. She bought an ace and bet nearly twenty pounds. Next, she got the court card

she wanted and won with her pontoon against the dealer's nineteen.

In the next hand she won fifty pounds, buying five cards without busting.

The two wins were enough. She stood up.

'You see how it is? You have to want to win.'

'My trouble is,' Macy replied, 'I don't want to lose.'

She took his arm again and leaned close against him. 'Some people gamble as if they were stuffing laundry down a chute, Steve. I have too much respect for money to do that.'

'Well, I suppose your husband doesn't mind paying your losses.'

'I don't think Mrs West has to get Richard or anyone else to pay her bills,' a smooth voice interrupted.

The black-haired man appeared suddenly behind Deirdre, his face more hollow and bony on a close view.

'I couldn't help overhearing your American friend, Deirdre.'

'Philip,' she said, without enthusiasm; 'this is Steve Macy.'

'Your American friend doesn't seem to realize he's talking to a beauty and an heiress,' Challis drawled.

'I couldn't fail to notice the first,' Macy retorted dryly.

'Steve, this is Philip Challis. Merchant banker. Financial eminence. Gnome of Threadneedle Street.'

The two men shook hands, and nodded.

Challis immediately began to speak to her almost confidentially, and Macy let the crowd nudge him away from them.

He fell back to a couch at the edge of the room.

A girl, in the purple, miniskirted uniform of the club was seated awkwardly on the arm. She crossed and uncrossed her long, black-stockinged legs and checked her watch.

There were no clocks on the walls, no way of telling whether it was night or day.

She noticed Macy as he sat down, and she smiled.

All the girls looked the same. All of them smiled at the customers.

'Hi,' he said. 'Taking a rest?'

'Not exactly,' she replied. 'I'm waiting to go on that black-jack table. At two a.m.'

He noticed the marked difference in accent to Deirdre West and Linda. The girl's voice was heavy, slurred.

'You're a dealer?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Tough job?'

'Takes a time to learn, I must say.'

'Did your Dad buy you a pack of cards when you were ten?'

'No, but he got me the job,' she said.

Macy felt that something was due from him. 'I'm over from New York on business.'

'Oh yeah?' she said, and then looked again at her watch. 'I'm sorry—I've got to go.'

She slipped away, pale and serious, to appear beside the existing dealer at the table, her head bent to the cards that she would control for the next two hours.

'It doesn't take long for you to find another woman,' Deirdre West said, her thighs and belly rippling before him under the thin frock.

'Let's go into the bar.'

'I'd like a breath of fresh air. We can walk to the end of the block,' she said. 'Do you mind?'

Macy didn't mind at all, but he looked round for West.

'Richard's drinking in the bar with his cronies. Forget him. Anyway, I can go for a walk if I want.'

Macy selected this as the moment, as they moved across the room to the stairs.

'Do you remember a Libra man called Mike Brooks. He used to be Financial Controller?'

She turned those full, green, amused eyes on him.

'Mike Brooks,' she mused. 'I'm afraid I don't know them all, Steve, and I can't recall Mr Brooks.'

Macy decided to press it. 'I heard he was kicked out of Libra for making love to you.'

She laughed, revealing the splendid, even, white teeth, and the hot, pink mouth. 'Steve, don't you know I'm supposed to have loved them all and danced in the nude at directors' meetings?'

He would never pin her down.

'Do you see much of Harry Beech?' he asked.

For once the amusement had gone from the wide eyes. They were hard, glassy.

'You're not going to ask me if I've made love to him,' she said coldly.

He saw the nasty conjunction of questions. 'I'm sorry——'

But she was quickly reassured. 'Forget it.'

'I was only going to ask what sort of man he is.'

They emerged on to the street, and walked towards Park Lane.

'I'm not sure what sort of man he is,' she said. 'He keeps very much to himself, more in recent years than ever.'

They stopped at the scraggy line of shrubbery which fringes the entrance to the Dorchester and watched the absurd posturing of the people going in and out and the uniformed flunkeys helping them.

'A kind of Midas, I suppose, with brains instead of magic.'

The night was not too cold and the breeze had dropped. They could stand for a few moments longer.

'Is Challis very important to Libra?' he asked.

She continued to look towards the Dorchester.

'We all look so bloody silly, don't we? ... Challis is the Cardinal Richelieu. He's vital.'

'Is Harry so—so weak then, so much out of his depth?'

She turned to him, her pensiveness gone.

'You ask a lot of questions, Mr Macy. Here we are, in the moonlight, and all you want to do is talk!'

They laughed. He could feel the warmth of her arm pressed against his. And then she broke away.

'I'll have to go,' she gasped, and ran off into the darkness, the whiteness of her dress and satin shoes flashing as she disappeared.

19

The breakfast tray was placed by Macy's bed and the waiter drew the curtains back to reveal the tops of the trees in Hyde Park and a blue sky flecked with white.

On the tray was a grapefruit, hot toast, butter, marmalade and a pot of coffee. And an envelope containing a cable.

Macy tore the envelope open and read the cable:

AIR BROKERS ABLE TO VERIFY THAT ALL LISTED AIRCRAFT ARE VALIDLY INSURED AND INSURERS ARE SATISFIED IN EACH CASE THAT THE AIRCRAFT PROPERLY REGISTERED
PRESCOTT

So the planes weren't imaginary. Macy poured a cup of coffee and sipped it black. He lit a cigarette to ease his thoughts.

But Libra wasn't operating the planes. Who the hell was? And why?

'How did you find me?' Mike Brooks charged across the room towards him, flushing, embarrassed. He was a little fat guy, totally unattractive.

'Linda Hall,' Macy said, grinning and taking the fat hand offered.

'Sure. Linda Well, here I am.' He rolled his protuberant eyes behind the spectacles to include the whole bare room.

'Who are the people you're working for?'

'Berry & Co? Importers. Exporters. Aircraft spares. That kind of thing. It's owned by Libra.'

'But I thought——'

'You heard?' The fat man waited.

'I heard you were kicked out, but that can't be right.'

'It is and it isn't. Did you hear what I was kicked out for?' Brooks's eyes were enlarged and made a series of concentric circles behind the lenses.

'For fooling with Deirdre West.'

'That's the story,' Brooks said bitterly.

'It's not true?'

'It is and it isn't.'

'I never thought of you as a ram, Mike.'

Brooks's mouth turned down. 'It's not funny.'

Macy saw the bursting suit, the fat neck flowing over a tight white collar. It wasn't so funny.

'I get the same salary here,' Brooks said defensively.

It was no use soft-pedalling. 'But this is a dump, Mike. A small export import house. You were financial boss of one of the most vigorous corporations in the country.'

Mike Brooks had recovered himself. 'I know, Steve. You see——'

A dark-skinned man came in the door with an armful of manilla files.

'Damn it, Khalil, don't just walk in here when I'm engaged. And get some coffee sent in.'

Khalil put the files on the desk with dignity, smiled superciliously at Brooks, and went out.

'You're touchy, Mike.'

'That oily bastard knows—but come and sit down, and let me tell you.'

Macy took a seat near Brooks. The once sharp, pushy executive huddled in a doughy ball. Then he shot a question which reminded Macy that he wasn't completely immersed in being sorry for himself.

'What are you doing here, Steve?'

Nothing was to be gained by pretending it was a social visit. 'First Bankers Trust in New York have asked me to report on some aspects of the Libra operation. They're thinking of buying in.'

Brooks whistled. 'The big one, eh?'

'Very big.'

'Far East?'

'How did you know?'

'It's been on the drawing-board for years. Harry has always wanted it. I helped in some of the planning.'

He was on to something. But he steered away for the moment. 'Tell me about the trouble you had.'

Brooks was calculating the win or lose behind his blotchy, padded face. He decided quickly. 'I was called to Richard West's office one day. West wasn't there. I was asked to wait inside ... by that—that big titted whore he calls a secretary. Then Deirdre West came in. I knew her slightly, from receptions and office parties. She came close to me. Nice as pie. Too nice. Put her hands on my shoulders and told me I looked

tired. What do you do when a woman like that puts her hands on you...?'

'Get a hard on, I guess,' Macy said.

Brooks wasn't amused. 'You can't push her away. You can't say, "Take your hands off me before somebody gets the wrong idea." I was petrified, yes——'

Steve Macy couldn't help himself. 'Petrified?'

'Yes. Having a hot bitch like that coming up to you. I'm a married man, Steve. I've got a family. She gave me a wicked kind of look. You know, wicked. And bent over. And kissed me. And said, "That'll cheer you up."'

'Doesn't sound so bad to me.'

'Bad? Bad? It was a disaster. Richard West was in the doorway.'

A girl brought in two plastic mugs of coffee.

'Can't you get out the cups?' Brooks snarled, and the girl slammed the door on the way out.

'It's too thin, Mike.'

'You think so?'

'The Wests don't act like that. They're not that sort of people.'

'Do you believe what I've told you?'

'Yeah. But what happened next?'

'West took me away to another office and told me I could take this job or be dismissed.'

'Surely you protested...?'

'I howled my head off. His wife made it ten times worse by saying things like "don't blame him" and "it's not his fault" when West caught us—there you are, I'm using the word "caught" as though there was something to catch....'

'It doesn't hang together,' Macy said.

'No it doesn't, with Mrs West getting her arse fucked off by every Italian waiter she meets, and her husband with his hand on his secretary's fanny during dictation.'

'So you decided to come here?'

'I'm a married man. How would I get a decent job after being dismissed from Libra? I have kids at school. I can't afford to be a martyr. I can leave here with a clean sheet.

I would have been smeared with shit if I'd fought West, and lost my job anyway.'

Macy shook his head hopelessly. 'I understand, Mike, but why? Why?'

The fat man stared at the bare wall in front of him. Then he swivelled his heavy neck towards Macy. The bulging eyes scrutinized Macy's face, calculating.

Brooks almost whispered. 'Because I wanted to do certain things to correct Libra's negative cash flow.'

Macy echoed the finance man's jargon. 'Negative cash flow. . . ?'

The neat phrase didn't really impinge.

Brooks waited with a faint smile. Then he said, 'Libra was losing five million dollars a month, every month, taken over all its operations . . . God alone knows what it's losing now.'

'I thought I'd stop by for that drink,' Macy said, leaning on the doorpost.

'You've done it again,' she said impassively.

'Done what?' Macy asked, hating her guessing games.

'Called here without an invitation.'

'Shall I go away?' he chanced.

Linda made a small gesture of inconsequence with her shoulders. 'It takes some nerve, some . . . insensitivity.'

'That's me, Thick, insensitive.'

She smiled. 'You can say that again!'

He followed her inside. She was wearing a dressing-gown. He could see the dark shadows of her breasts and buttocks beneath the thin material.

He sat down on the couch. 'It's very comfortable here.'

'Don't relax too much,' she said, pushing a heavy crystal tumbler full of scotch into his hand, 'I'm going to throw you out in a minute.'

'It's quite a luxurious life you have here. Where's it all going to lead, Boss Lady?'

She ignored the question. 'How's your investigation?'

'Fine. I saw Brooks.'

'Did he help?'

'He was thrown out because he knew too much.'

'Rubbish.'

'He told me that when he was "transferred," Libra was losing five million dollars a month.'

'All big companies have periods of loss.'

'I wonder how big a period of loss this was—or is?'

'Libra's okay.'

She was completely confident, impregnable.

'What are you doing tonight?'

'I just had a shower,' she said dumbly.

'Why don't we go out and eat?'

'Because you know why.'

He leaned close and smelt her hair, still damp from the bathroom. She looked at him quickly. Her dark, brown eyes were softer.

'Come out with me,' he said gently.

'I have a date,' she replied, but her eyes half closed and her lips opened slightly as his hand slid between the buttons on her bosom.

He slopped the drink with one hand as the other encountered the two small bare breasts he remembered so well, the erect, excited nipples.

'Steve, Steve, don't,' she moaned.

She was sliding towards him, and then she stopped herself, and stood up.

'Don't fight it,' he said hoarsely.

'I don't want to go back.'

'Do we have to *go back*? Can't it be something new, different, better, *because* of the past?'

She held a small hand up to her forehead. She looked like a young child.

'It might,' she said hesitantly.

He took her hand and pulled her towards him.

'I'm afraid of—of *this*, of our physical relationship, of its power to distort, to twist, to burn and hurt....'

He drew her closer and she came, standing in front of him as he sat on the couch, both her hands in his.

'It's our peculiar spark,' he said. 'I've never experienced anything like it, never....'

'It's a holocaust ...' she replied faintly.

He released her hands and she plunged them into his hair. His own hands passed round the back of her thighs.

'In spite of it all we still don't know each other ...' she said.

The gown was open before him and his face buried in the pad of hair, his tongue seeking, and finding.

'You win,' she muttered, dragging him upward by the hair.

She slipped the gown off. Only the decided curve of her thighs stopped it being a girl's body. She ran for the bedroom.

'Hurry,' she said.

He followed, littering a trail of clothing.

She had thrown herself face down on the coverlet. 'Hurry,' she urged.

'I want to go in here,' he said, returning to the calculating male animal with a task to perform. He went into the adjoining bathroom, urinated, washed his hands and splashed cold water on his face.

He towelled his face and opened the door of the bathroom locker without thinking, looking automatically for cologne.

He saw the man's razor, the shaving cream, the after-shave lotion.

He took the cap off the lotion and sniffed the exquisite, expensive odour.

'Why so long, Steve?' she called through the open door.

He replaced the lotion, rubbing the spot on his cheek where he had dabbed it.

'It won't keep warm for ever,' she said.

'Then we'll re-heat it,' he replied harshly.

When he appeared in the doorway, she had turned over to face him. She was resting on one elbow, the other hand caressing herself.

She stared at him curiously. He was slack, uninterested. 'Steve...?'

He kicked his underpants and slacks out of the bedroom door ahead of himself and began to dress in the lounge.

He heard her moaning and sighing on the bed. Her sounds quickened and suddenly tore out of her in her orgasm: 'Why why why why why why...?'

Silence.

'Because I care for you! That's why!' he shouted at the empty room, before he went out and slammed the front door.

20

Steve Macy had been in the cocktail bar for more than two hours when the hotel paged him to take Klein's call from New York.

He hadn't felt hungry, and the whisky had gone to his head.

Klein was affable. 'You're having a night off, Steve?'

'Only work fifteen hours a day for Libra.'

'Great. Any further news on Cobral?'

'Nope.'

'I don't think there's much in that line, Steve.'

'Nope.'

'Now, about these aircraft checks. Orville had a comprehensive search made for you there ... I confess I don't get what you're up to ... is there anything in it?'

'Looks like I was wrong. Again.'

'You've seen the financial people at Libra?'

'I've met the previous financial controller.'

'What does he say?'

'That he was fired for trying to do something to cure losses running at five million dollars a month.'

Klein was thinking. 'None of the estimated accounts we have to date, and of course none of the previously finalized accounts, reflect losses of that order.'

'So they didn't happen?'

'They may have happened in the short term, and been offset by gains.'

'You're not concerned?'

'Not without much more information, Steve. You'll find bellyaching ex finance men anywhere you like to look. Finance policy is very touchy.'

'I won't pursue this line of inquiry, then.'

'I don't think we'll need you in London much more, Steve.'

'You don't need a report for the Board now?'

'Well, not to the same extent....'

'What's happened?'

'Harry Beech and his team were over. West, Cooper....'

'I know 'em. At least the last two. Beech I never met.'

'He's a charming and intelligent man. The Board were impressed. So was I. He had all the facts and figures. He's no figurehead, Steve. He knew all the details. Didn't need anyone to hold his hand.'

'I've heard he's a super-salesman.'

'It was hard facts. Not emotion.'

'Sure. Hard facts.'

'Why so sceptical, Steve?'

'Herb, something is wrong. *Wrong*. Get it? You and dear Orville are going to get burned.'

'Okay. Give me facts.'

'I need a little more time.'

'Take some. Go out, Steve. Go to the theatre. That's London. Find a little rosy-cheeked girl to screw....'

'Any more advice, Uncle Herb?'

'Relax, son. Beech has pretty well convinced the Board, and especially Ullman, that they have a bargain.'

'So Ullman loves Harry too.'

'Love at first sight ... maybe the man has a nose for opposition, Harry I mean. He captivated Ullman. They found out they have properties near each other in Spain——'

'Oh shit!'

'What did you say, Steve?'

'Castles in Spain....'

'What???'

Macy lay on his bed in the dark, smoking. He could hear the muffled sound of traffic in Park Lane, and occasional voices from the forecourt of the hotel.

Cigarette after cigarette. He couldn't even be bothered to get up and get himself a drink. Linda's moaning came back to him painfully.

The telephone rang stridently, demanding.

'Hullo—hullo—hullo——' he said.

From out of the silence at the other end, Deirdre West's

voice came through the telephone like a long, warm, pink, exciting, caressing tongue.

'Why don't you come to the Cassandra, Steve?'

He replied without thinking. 'I'd like to.'

'I'll pick you up at the hotel. It's more convenient.'

There was enough in her voice to make his crotch tighten. But he was wary: 'I have to go out now. I'll meet you there in an hour.'

'Sure. If it suits you, Big Man.'

Macy took a long hot shower and finished off with a short cold one. He cleaned his teeth, swallowed half a glass of whisky, and put on a newly dry cleaned suit.

The effect, in the tall mirror, was rather crumpled and blurry. His hair wouldn't lie down. He smoothed the lines on his face, but as soon as he took his fingers away, they all sprang back into position.

'Ready, you old bastard?' he asked himself.

He frowned back in the mirror. 'You're not old,' he replied to himself indignantly. 'You're in the very prime of life.'

The doorman at the Cassandra consulted a list on his desk. 'Mrs West's guest, Mr Macy. Yes. Would you like to go into the casino? I don't think Mrs West is here yet.'

'Tell her I'm here when she comes, will you? I'll be at the roulette table.'

Steve Macy walked into the glittering gaming room. He changed his mind and took a seat away from the crowd. He could see the bare backs of the long gowned women.

He lit a cigarette and half closed his eyes. The flesh was more exciting than the silk and jewels which decked it.

'Hullo. I hope you've been winning.'

At first, Macy didn't realize the remark was addressed to him. He vaguely remembered the flat, blurry, female voice.

He turned. She was standing near him, looking as though she was on duty, bursting out of the skin tight purple uniform of the club.

Her face was the face of a hundred hostesses. Then he remembered: 'Oh hi! We met the other night ... you were about to go and deal the blackjack table.'

'When are you going back to New York?'

'Ah, you recall that, too....'

'I have a good memory. You need it in my job.'

'Mine's not bad either: for example I can recall you told me your father got you your job.'

'Right.'

'Does he work here, too?'

'No. Dad works for the guy that owns this joint. Harry Beech. You've heard of him?'

'Yeah.'

Macy moved over beside her. She was tall, perhaps nineteen. And the face wasn't just any attractive face on a toothpaste advertisement.

'What does your Dad do?'

'He's a chief messenger.' She saw Macy was puzzled. 'Messenger. You know. Runs round delivering letters. He's called a senior outdoor clerk, and he wears a bun hat and a flower in his lapel, but really he's chief messenger.'

'What's your name?'

She looked at him sharply. Her dark blue eyes hung on for a second longer than necessary between casual acquaintances. 'Miranda Tidy. What's yours?'

'Steve Macy. I know your father, Miranda. Ernie—at the door of the Libra offices in Pall Mall.'

'That's him,' she laughed. 'How funny! 'Course a lot of the Libra people come here, and they all know Dad.'

'Does Harry?'

'Sometimes. He played my table once. I was ever so nervous. The manager wanted to swap me for one of the more experienced girls, and Harry wouldn't have it. 'Leave her there,' he says. He lost about twenty pounds and tipped me ten. It's the tips that make it worth while.'

'What's Harry like?'

'You're not some kind of spy are you?' she quipped.

'I don't know the man, honest. I'm interested, that's all.'

The amused blue eyes held on to his again. 'Well, I'll tell you. It isn't easy to talk to Harry when he comes in because he's always surrounded by men who look so serious. But he looks ever so nice. Kinda young. Why are you so interested?'

'I'm over from the States to—to do some work with Libra.'

'I get it. And you don't get to meet a big wheel like Harry.'

'Not me. I'm a little wheel.'

'Not so little if you can afford to come in here.'

'I play with movie money.'

'Not like Harry. Look. See that blonde over there? The one with the see-through dress?' she nodded in the direction. 'That's Deirdre West, wife of one of the big bosses. Boy, can she spend it. You should see the fellers she has drooling over her.'

'I know her, Miranda.'

'You do? All that little wheel stuff! My time's nearly up. I'll have to go.'

'Perhaps we'll meet...?'

'Perhaps ... She's looking over here. Looking for you,' she sighed. Her long breasts rose and fell. 'She's real quality. Everything she wears costs a million dollars.'

'I prefer you, Miranda.'

The blue eyes were swept by changing emotions, disbelief, hope. 'Is she your...?'

'I said I prefer you. Meet me tonight, and we'll have a cup of coffee and talk about it.'

'I don't finish till three.'

'I can wait that long. In the foyer at three.'

Deirdre detached herself from the crowd when Macy failed to acknowledge her glance, and floated towards them. She did not look at Miranda. Miranda might not have existed.

'Steve, darling. What are you doing over here all by yourself? Come and join us.'

Deirdre enveloped him with her perfume and her hand was lightly on his arm.

Miranda retreated a pace, her eyes earnestly fixed on his. 'Okay,' she said in her curious, thick voice which contrasted so with Deirdre's.'

Deirdre watched Miranda walk away. 'Attractive young slut,' she remarked. 'You're never far away from it, are you, Steve?'

'Nice legs,' Steve Macy said.

'I've a bit of a headache, Steve. Would you mind if we went out for some air?'

She led him through the foyer. Macy noted the flicker on the doorman's face as they passed him. It was the almost imperceptible note the doorman made of something regarded, with cynicism, as perfectly usual.

They walked a few paces in the bitter air and she steered him into the darker shadows of a near-by building.

She fastened herself on to him. 'Oh Steve, Steve, Steve....'

He could feel her writhing against him as though she were naked.

'Take it easy,' he gasped.

'Steve! Darling!'

He submerged for a moment in the voluptuous possession of her body, until a warning buzzed inside his skull.

'Somebody's coming!' he hissed.

She was free in an instant, calmly smoothing her long honey hair.

'You look fine,' Macy said.

Even in the shadow he could see her petulant expression: 'There's nobody coming!' she said.

'I thought there was,' he lied.

'Steve, if you're free we could go to your hotel....'

He thought.

'No,' he replied, finally.

She clawed at his collar. 'You've got a date with that tuppenny tart, haven't you?'

'I'm over here to do a job, Deirdre. You'll get me into a whole lot of trouble.'

'I won't get you into any trouble. I rather like you. I didn't think you were so timid——'

But he was walking back towards the bright blue and-white awning over the front of the Cassandra.

21

Richard West adjusted the heavy silk tie from the reflection in his office window.

'I don't think we need worry any further about the efforts of Mr Steve Macy,' he said.

He could see the top of Nelson's Column, in Trafalgar Square, from the window. He could not see Nelson's stance, at the top of the Column, at this distance, but he knew how confident it was. He was no less confident.

'Glad to hear it,' Philip Challis said from the depths of one of the huge leather chairs.

'Harry was quite magnificent with the First Bankers people. Blinded them with science. I shouldn't be surprised if they recall Macy.'

'The mere presence of the man is disquieting.'

West came back to his desk. 'Macy hasn't the training to make an investigation ... now March was different.'

Challis broke in quickly. 'I recall you telling me that March's visit was routine, nothing to worry about.'

'I was wrong about March, but I'm right about Macy.'

'What's he been doing in London?'

'He's been out to Luton——'

'Whatever for?'

'I don't know. He saw Gray. Looked over the Ops. Room. We don't know why. You see, his approach is completely different from March's. March stayed two floors down in Accounts, and never budged for months.'

The hollows of Challis's cadaverous face were accentuated as he stared at West.

'He's seen Bronstein in Accounts and Ridgway's the auditors. I had a call from Charles Flackman of Ridgway's. He thought Macy was a bloody fool. Bronstein says so, too. Doesn't know finance, you see. Doesn't understand the accounts. Asks stupid questions,' West went on.

Challis went on staring. 'Anything else?'

West decided to reveal one last thing. 'He's seen Michael Brooks.'

'Who's he?'

'Used to be Financial Controller.'

'Ah. The one you feared might approach other Board members or make a fuss? The one you fired.'

'I moved him sideways. Out of my way.'

Challis was very calm. 'How do you find out what Macy's doing?'

'Linda Hall keeps an eye on him. Officially. Takes him round, makes introductions. I gather he talks freely to her. They know each other from way back.'

Challis didn't reply. He looked out of the window at the darkening sky.

'Well?' West asked, knowing that something was to come.

'I was thinking. About fifty million pounds.'

'What fifty million?'

'The fifty million I personally have tied up in Libra.'

'What about it?'

'Whether I want to trust it to your judgment.'

'My judgment? What do you mean?'

'Your ability to judge this man Macy. A man who makes inquiries we can't understand——'

West interrupted firmly. 'He's scratching round. No plan. No understanding. Has to do something. He's got to justify his visit.'

'A man who is so stupid,' Challis persisted, 'that he goes to see the one top Libra employee who had the guts to object to the way the company was being run——'

West cut in again: 'He'll take a ream of bullshit back to New York, collect his pay and go back to playing at being a welfare lawyer.'

Challis's voice was low. 'Macy the fool somehow seems to find Brooks.'

'They know each other——'

'Of course they do. That only makes it worse——'

'Brooks knows nothing,' West asserted.

'He knows of at least a year of heavy losses which were not . . . er, not reflected in the books or profit forecasts or circulars.'

'Brooks can't give Macy the kind of information needed to turn First Bankers off, now they're so hot.'

Challis unwound from the chair and went towards the door.

'You sound convincing, Richard. That's why you're Managing Director. You seem to be completely confident.'

'I am.'

Challis gave him one last hollow-eyed look before going out the door.

Steve Macy took Brooks to lunch at Tiberio's in Mayfair.

Brooks studied the menu as though it was a set of accounts.

'This guy March who was killed,' Macy began, 'made some notes that seem to suggest some of the planes are overvalued.'

Brooks came out from behind the menu card. 'I'm not too surprised. When Harry's bidding for another company and giving away Libra shares in exchange, he has to keep the value up as much as possible.'

'Some of the planes that are scheduled as assets don't seem to be operated by Libra at all.'

Brooks ordered turkey pâté, avocado pear with shrimps, T-bone steak with pizzaiola sauce, and a mixed salad. 'Really?' he replied.

Macy settled for steak and salad. 'How do you know the assets in the balance sheet exist?'

'Because the auditors check.'

'Examine every plane?' Macy asked.

The waiter brought two large martinis and a bottle of claret.

'No. Every plane is represented by a valuation certificate from the air-brokers.'

'So that if you faked the certificate——'

'It wouldn't be so easy, Steve. Planes have to be registered and insured. This involves inspections, payment of premiums——'

The fat man liked to eat. He gulped the martini and began stuffing in pâté and toast.

He went on with his mouth full: 'There must be some explanation about those planes, Steve. Maybe they're being operated by someone else. Take it from me it would be too complicated to dream up imaginary planes.'

'I'm on the wrong track, then?' Macy said, letting the fumes of the drink, its sweetness, fill his nose and lungs.

'I think so.' Brooks was busily gutting the avocado. 'If you catch Libra out on some of their valuations, even that won't do you much good. They'll say it was a mistake.'

'Even those losses you mentioned to me can be explained away?'

'They can, Steve. They can.' Brooks stripped the last bit of flesh from the avocado. He chewed appreciatively, showing the yellow mess in his mouth. 'You see, accounting is an art, not a science.'

Macy finished his drink and tried a new approach: 'West must have been worried if he kicked you out.'

'It's another thing to get at the facts. Maybe I could have settled my differences with West, but Challis heard about it, and I think he was the one who wanted to get rid of me.'

Brooks swallowed a glass of claret and attacked the huge steak.

'Is he the one behind Harry?'

Brooks found a space to talk through a forkful of lettuce leaf: 'Don't make any mistake about it, Harry is a big, creative man. He's everything that people say. He doesn't need anyone to do his homework for him. But Challis is a leech. He sucks the blood out of Harry. He's never at the centre. Always at the side. Always dealing for himself. Taking a commission. Taking a fee. If Libra went broke tomorrow thousands would be hurt, but not that bastard.'

'He's clever,' Macy said.

'As a tax and finance man, a banker, Challis is brilliant. No doubt. The difference between the two is that Harry is genuinely creative. Harry can build things, and he can visualize them before he starts building.'

Brooks pushed the rest of the steak into his mouth as he swallowed, and went on regardless: 'Challis needs a Harry to play with; he's a fixer and a taker and a blood-sucking nihilist.'

'Superb steak,' he got out with his final, monstrous swallow. 'After all,' he smiled, 'Challis is a banker.'

Brooks ordered ice cream with chocolate sauce, strawberry flan and cream, espresso coffee, cheese, a cognac, a cigar and some peppermints.

'Coffee for me,' Macy said.

'Lovely lunch, Steve,' the fat man said.

* * *

When Steve Macy woke he only had to turn his arm a fraction to see the face of his wristwatch. It was five in the afternoon.

He turned his head gently to avoid shaking the bed. She was awake, looking at him, smiling.

'How long did we sleep?' she asked.

'An hour, I guess.'

'I drifted off like I'd had some powerful drug.'

'You did.'

She gave a little secret smile of recollection.

He ran his fingers down over her belly.

'Darling, you'll start it all again.'

'Don't you want to?' he asked.

'I do, but I've got to go to work.'

'What time?'

'Six.'

He slipped out of bed and poured two whiskies.

'Don't make mine too big, Steve. You know I hardly drink.'

He brought both glasses back to bed. Hers was a light one.

'You've hardly had time to pick up the habit,' he said. 'How old are you, anyway?'

'Never ask a woman her age,' she replied.

He made a face of mock horror: 'I might be committing an offence. You've *got* to tell me!'

She laughed. 'Eighteen.'

'Is that all?' He was genuinely surprised.

'I've got all the necessary accessories, haven't I?'

'And pubic hair as well.'

She put her drink down almost untasted. 'I'll take a shower,' she said.

He watched her stately figure cross the floor. He lay back in the bed with his hands behind his head. He was buoyant.

She didn't shut the bathroom door, and he could see her body in the frosted glass of the shower closet. The water was running and she was soaping herself.

She turned the taps off. 'Steve? Can you...?'

He went to her, picking up a towel.

She opened the closet door and he could see she was still covered with thick suds.

'Come here, darling,' she said.

'What do you want, Miranda...?'

She drew him close and embraced him and he struggled to hold her as they slithered in the confined space. Then she managed to balance on the step at the entrance to get enough extra height for him to get inside her.

'Oh darling,' she said, 'that's good, but this is better,' and she pulled away.

She sat astride the edge of the bath, one leg in, one out, and lay along the edge, her thighs wide open.

As he went down on her he chuckled to himself. She had all the mad enthusiasm you'd expect of a kid.

Steve Macy walked Miranda over to Tilney Street and came straight back to the Inn on the Park.

'This message came in while you were out, Mr Macy,' the desk clerk said, handing him a cable.

It was from Prescott.

DOCUMENTS FOR THE NEW VENTURE BETWEEN FIRST BANKERS AND LIBRA HAVE NOW BEEN APPROVED BY BOTH SIDES FOR SIGNATURE IN HONGKONG ON THURSDAY EIGHTEENTH STOP PRESUME YOU HAVE NO WORTHWHILE INFORMATION AND SUGGEST YOU CONCLUDE YOUR INQUIRIES WITHIN NEXT FEW DAYS AND RETURN TO REPORT TO BOARD
PRESCOTT

Macy paused in the bar on his way upstairs for more than several whiskies.

22

'He's gone,' the voice said very quietly over the telephone.

'What do you mean, gone?' Macy snapped.

'I mean Mr Brooks is not here.'

Macy sighed with exasperation: 'When will he be back?'

'Oh, not for long time.'

'How bloody long?' Macy shouted.

'I don't know,' the quiet voice said.

'You're being obstructive. Who are you?'

'My name is Khalil.'

'I want to speak to the General Manager or the Managing Director. I want to speak to your boss.'

'I am sorry. He is not here....'

'I'll ask you again to tell me when Brooks will be back.'

'I think perhaps a month. Maybe two. Who can say——'

Steve Macy cut him off and dialled Brooks's home.

'Is that Mrs Brooks?'

'Yes.'

'I'm trying to get in touch with your husband, Mrs Brooks. My name's Steve Macy——'

'Oh yes, Mr Macy. Mike has mentioned your name. I'm afraid he's had to go away suddenly. Yes. To Canada.'

'Canada?' Macy said incredulously.

'Yes. Silly, isn't it? So quick. Just five minutes to pack and off. Dear me!'

'Does Mike usually travel like this on short notice?'

'He's never been away since he's been with Berry & Co., until this time.'

Steve Macy took a taxi all the way to Luton. He decided to walk in on James Gray. The only precaution he took was to call the Luton switchboard and find out if he was in.

Macy even ignored Gray's secretary, and he looked so assured as he passed her, heading for the holy of holies which she guarded with her life, that she didn't even raise her painted eyebrows.

He opened the office door and went in. Gray was bent over his papers, his face furrowed, coughing in a cloud of cigarette smoke.

'Can I have a word with you?'

Gray was flummoxed. 'Well—er—I suppose so.'

'This is a list of the planes which Libra don't appear to be operating,' Macy said, holding out a paper. 'It includes the crashed plane G-AMAC.'

'But why are you showing it to me? We're not operating them, so what?'

'Could you look at the list?'

Gray eyed it in a cursory way and then put it down, away from him, as though it was dirty and he wanted not to have to be forced to see it.

'Very interesting,' he said. 'No doubt part of the fleet of Wogga-Wogga airways.'

'Are they ex-Libra planes?'

'How would I know? What do you think I am, a computer?'

'You're not being very helpful. I think you could tell whether they're the kind of planes Libra is likely to have had.'

'Oh we're *likely* to have had those planes, big Douglases and Boeings. But don't ask me to tell you whether we've ever operated those actual planes listed there. When I've finished memorizing the Old and New Testaments I'll get round to all past and present air registration numbers.'

'You could check your records.'

Gray was getting annoyed. 'I'm not going to check anything. You come in here....'

'All those planes, the whole ten of them, are registered and insured in Libra's name.'

Gray lit another cigarette off the butt of the first. His fingers trembled. 'I can't explain that, and I'm not going to try.'

'And they're shown in the schedule of assets submitted to First Bankers as being worth about fifty million dollars.'

'I have no doubt there is a reasonable explanation,' Gray said, 'and I'm asking you to go.'

'Do you think they're imaginary planes? Do you think they don't exist?'

'I don't know. Even if I did know I wouldn't discuss things further with you. You can't come in here when you like. I understood all your inquiries were going to be arranged by Miss Hall——'

Macy picked up his list and walked out.

Linda was waiting for him in the foyer of the Inn on the Park when he got back.

'Let's talk, Steve,' she said flatly, keeping all expression from her face.

'Sure. Come up.'

'No. I prefer the coffee bar.'

'Scared of yourself?'

'I want to talk business.'

'Yes, Boss Lady.'

They found a secluded table and settled over two large cups of black coffee.

She started in immediately. 'Steve, why did you go out and see Jim Gray without telling me?'

'What's the crime?' Macy asked, innocently.

'Don't shit me, Steve. You know I was assigned to look after you and arrange all introductions to Libra people.'

'To spy on me.'

'You can call it spying if you like. I don't care what word you use. All contacts with Libra people were to be through me.'

'That wasn't exactly *said*.'

'Level with me, Steve. This is important.'

'Okay. All contacts were through you so you could report back to West. I knew that. I was a naughty boy to pounce on Gray.'

'This means trouble for me,' she said.

She sounded soft, like a woman.

'It's that important?'

'West takes an interest....'

'I'll bet he does!'

'I don't really understand what it's all about. I suppose West wants you to present Libra in the best light.'

'He's not helping much. Why did he send Brooks to Canada?'

'What?' she asked, uncomprehending. 'I don't know anything about that.'

'Never mind Linda. No harm done.'

'Did you find out what you wanted?'

He ignored the question.

'I'll have to tell West,' she said.

'And he'll go mad?' Macy asked.

'I don't know,' she replied, biting her lip. 'I wanted this to go smoothly.'

'Afraid of losing your job?'

'I've worked hard for it, Steve. I wouldn't like anything to jeopardize it.'

'If you and I got together, maybe you wouldn't need the job,' he said.

She looked at him steadily. 'Is it possible ...?'

'I think so.'

Challis's voice had a slight whine, a well-suppressed petulance, as his question floated across the space of Richard West's office.

'But I thought that woman was supposed to be following him round?'

'Linda Hall, in charge of Personnel,' West said.

'I don't care much what her name is. She can't do the job.'

'He gave her the slip. Went straight to Gray,' West replied. 'There was nothing Linda could do.'

'And what did Macy want?'

'Gray says he was asking more questions about aircraft values.' West drew on a small cigar and leaned back in his chair. 'Don't worry. He knows nothing.'

Challis stood up and walked over to the window with his hands in his pockets. 'You are very good with your assurances, but I don't always see the grounds for them in what you tell me.'

Challis remained at the window with a sardonic smile. He derived no satisfaction at all from Nelson's Column.

'Here we have a man whom you describe as virtually incapable of preparing a realistic report on Libra. He manages to see one of the weakest links in our chain—Brooks; and he seems to understand that the Libra assets are overvalued——'

'Listen,' West interrupted, 'Gray can give him nothing, because Gray understands nothing outside his immediate operations work.'

'But if we knew exactly—and I mean exactly—the line Macy was pursuing, the precise questions he put to Gray, we'd have an immediate understanding of how much he knows, how vulnerable we are,' Challis persisted.

West swelled with irritation. He picked up and threw down

the paper-knife on his desk. 'I'm Managing Director of this company. Do you think I have the time to go round taking verbatim notes?'

'Unless you do, you may not have a company to manage.'

West had a habit of looking to the side, and slightly over his shoulder before he made a pronouncement, like a general reassuring himself that his troops were in order. 'I suspended Gray today.'

Challis took all things quietly. Only the dark eyes in their deep hollows sparkled. 'Indeed?'

'He's taken an extremely independent line about the Hong Kong air investigation, obstructed our publicity department news releases on the subject——'

'What you're really telling me is that you can't get any detailed information from Gray on the Macy interview, because you two can't talk to each other.'

'What I'm really telling you is that Gray's word on anything wouldn't count with First Bankers, even supposing he had something to say. And I'm also reminding you that I run this show. If you've anything to say, say it to the rest of the Board.'

It was a moment of supreme pleasure for Anthony Poynton.

He had at last inherited the results of all the years of speaking at grotty little meetings, of buttonholing influential people, of cultivating pressmen and placating lobbyists; all the years of worrying whether he could afford school fees next year: financial security.

And the sense of financial security seemed to have its essence in this room.

The Board meeting was over. Secretaries and assistants had borne away the files and reports Brandy and cigars appeared.

Only three people remained, their chairs thrown back from the table, each turned a little in the direction of the great window that formed one wall of the room. They could look out over the old buildings, towards the Mall and Green Park.

Poynton saw the familiar shapes in the fading light with a comfort that almost amounted to a sense of ownership.

'I think we should drink a toast to our newest director,' Philip Challis said.

'I look forward to your help and advice, Tony,' Richard West said, raising his glass with Challis.

'I shall try to live up to your confidence,' Poynton responded, brushing the ash from his waistcoat. He wanted to jump to his feet and shout for joy; he wanted to remind them of his influence, of his brilliant future prospects. But he contented himself by watching the exciting sparkle of the brandy in his glass.

'I'm glad you took the opportunity to invest in a few Oriental Freight shares, Tony,' Challis said.

West sniggered: 'About as sure a thing as you can get.'

'I don't seem to have done anything,' Poynton protested. 'You've——'

'Your credit's good now, Tony. Understand that. I don't mind loaning you a few thousand on a sure thing,' Challis said.

'We'll all make a tidy killing, I dare say,' West said complacently.

'You make it sound so easy,' Poynton replied.

'With the kind of inside knowledge we have, it is easy,' Challis said.

'You see there are no rules against it,' West said, shaking his head in disbelief.

'You mean there should be?'

'I'm not running the world, Tony, and it's money in the bank for me the way it is now, but there should be,' West said.

'Indeed there should be,' Challis said, with a heavily assumed righteousness.

'There should be, there should be— But there ain't!' West chanted, moving over to the brandy decanter.

'There's the City Code,' Poynton said.

'God bless the City Code, more honoured in the breach than in any other way!' laughed West.

'Tony, my friend,' Challis said, 'Parliament and the People have found that the gentlemen of the City are uniquely virtuous. They don't need laws to rule them. All they need are

several distinguished gentlemen to think up the rules as we go along. It's eminently satisfactory.'

'Eminently,' echoed West. 'Like the committee of the local Darby and Joan Club trying to run the Ford Motor Company.'

Down inside the recesses of Poynton's shining turnip of a head a warning light of conscience glowed like a meteorite, and went out: this was the way clever men, just men, had ordained it should be. Why object?

'Thanks, I will have another brandy,' he said.

'When do you think you'll be able to let us know about the additional route licences?' West asked.

'I'm seeing the Minister again tomorrow, as you know,' Poynton replied, 'and he was very agreeable at our first talk....'

'But we don't have an official decision yet,' Challis said.

'I don't think there will be too much trouble, but I can't promise.'

'We need the additional routes,' West said.

'Absolutely vital,' Challis said.

Poynton nodded furiously. 'I understand how important it is, I do.'

'I know you'll pull it off, Tony,' Challis said.

'One final drink, gentlemen. I leave for Hong Kong tomorrow. We're on the brink of our biggest deal yet.' West held up the thin balloon to the light and squinted through it.

'All the details are settled,' he said. 'Signature of the documents on Thursday in Hong Kong——'

'Don't forget to collect the bank draft in favour of Libra for fifteen million dollars, will you?' Challis said in his most bored tone.

'I'll write it down,' West replied. 'After all, it's only the first of many instalments.'

Poynton polished his spectacles. 'I hope nothing goes wrong,' he said.

The other two turned to him.

'I mean -I know you're going ahead with the consortium anyway—but suppose I can't get the extra licences, or——'

Challis's face was dotted with pools of shadow in the shadowed room.

"You must get the licences, Tony, just as the deal with First Bankers must go through," he said evenly and without emphasis.

But under Challis's veneer of relaxation there was something hard, menacing.

As the three men walked out of the Boardroom, still puffing their cigars, coughing, chatting amicably, the rich comfort of the room, the security of it, seemed to Poynton to have gone.

23

Macy soaked in a hot bath at the hotel and did some thinking. Whether Klein and Prescott believed it or not, someone had stolen the March papers from the mortuary in Hong Kong, and someone had stolen some of them from him.

And Libra had been running at a big loss, at least for a while, long enough to alarm Brooks. Brooks had been kicked out of the limelight and discredited.

Then there were the ten missing planes. Or maybe they weren't missing. Maybe they were being operated by Cobral or another mysterious Swiss company.

'What it adds up to is one great big nasty corporation protecting its interests all along the line. What it adds up to is—nothing.'

Macy's words echoed in the steamy bathroom.

He climbed out of the tub and splashed across the lounge to pick up a copy of the *Financial Times*. Libra were a few points down according to the stock exchange report, but they were nearly twenty per cent up in the last quarter. Not exactly unhealthy.

Another report attracted his attention. Rumours of a take-over. Oriental Freight was the victim. Its shares had rocketed. Harry Beech was said to be interested.

How right they were! He threw the newspaper down and stopped on his way back to the bath to pour a double. He balanced the glass on the edge of the tub and let the hot water embrace him again.

'To hell with it,' he said to himself.

Sleep came slowly; it came in the darkened room as he twisted uncomfortably under the sheets; it brought the memory of the sharpened triangular file that had menaced his throat in the lift in Hong Kong——

And then he was awake, and the phone was ringing. He flipped on the lamp, and looked at his watch. Two o'clock in the morning.

'Mr Prescott calling from New York, Mr Macy,' the girl said. 'Shall I connect him?'

'Might as well.'

The old man must have something eating him to call personally at this hour.

'Hullo son. I had a call from London earlier this evening that worried me.'

Prescott wasn't going to muck around. 'What happened that you have to wake me up at two in the morning?' Macy asked.

'I had a call from Harry Beech.'

'I heard you were buddies now.'

'It was about you, Mr Macy.'

'I'm flattered I can excite attention at such an elevated level.'

'You won't be,' Prescott said with a wry, short laugh.

'What did Harry want?'

'He wants you out of London.'

'It figures.'

'No it doesn't, Mr Macy. Not the way I have it.'

What was the old bastard getting at? Macy could tell by the thin dry voice that Prescott was angry.

'You know Mrs West, Mr Macy?'

'Ohhh!' Macy groaned. It was all too clear. The bitch. 'Sure,' he said.

'You been out with her?' the dry voice went on.

'I've been in her company, at a club.'

'You been *outside* that club with her?' Prescott asked.

'Twice,' Macy said in a dead voice. She'd compromised Brooks, and now him. What a bloody fool he had been!

'Kissin' and messin' about with her?' Prescott said.

'Yes,' Macy agreed. What was the use of saying she'd been the one doing the messing round? He had walked right into it like the great randy prick he was.

'She's the wife of one of the top Libra people. And you're my special envoy....'

'You don't need to go any further, Mr Prescott. I get the message. But who set you up as arbiter of morals anyway?' Macy asked, his claws coming out in anger.

'Don't want any executive of mine gettin' mixed up with the boss's wife. Raises a lot of questionable influences, as well as being damn bad manners.'

The old man was right.

'I told Beech that if you confirmed what he said, and you have, I'd fire you on the spot. Our local agents will pay your hotel bill tomorrow morning, and give you an air ticket. Your drawing rights at the Bank of America will be cancelled in the morning——'

'What about my report to the Board?'

'I don't think either the Board or I want to hear anything further. Good night, Mr Macy.'

Macy was in Davies Street, Mayfair, a few minutes before ten. When the Bank of America offices opened, he was first to the window, sliding across a cheque form.

'You want it in cash? The whole two thousand?' the teller asked.

'Sure. I'm running out of pin money,' Macy said.

The teller went away to look at his records. Macy waited. So they came back and told him his rights had been cancelled? He'd go red and crawl away. But it was possible that Prescott's orders hadn't filtered through yet.

The clerk came back. 'How do you want it?'

'I'll take a hundred in fives, and the rest in the biggest notes you have.'

Macy tucked the money in his old briefcase and walked down through Berkeley Square to the Mayfair Hotel.

He treated himself to a real breakfast for a change: orange

juice, cereal, bacon and eggs with fried bread and tomatoes, hot buttered toast and coffee.

Being unemployed hadn't affected his appetite.

'Sorry, Mr Macy,' Ernie Tidy said, stepping in front of him. 'Accordin' to what I'm told, you ain't allowed in the buildin'. 'Course I can't stop you if you go on in, but it won't do much good, because they'll only ask you to go when you get to where you're goin'. Where was you goin' anyway?'

Macy looked up at Ernie's portly figure at the top of the entrance stairs to the Libra building. 'I wanted to see Miss Hall——'

'She ain't here, I can tell you that, Mr Macy. She's gone out with Mr Beech.'

It always gave him a pain when somebody mentioned Linda's name in conjunction with a man, any man. Even after all this time.

'Does she work a lot with Mr Beech?'

'I don't know about that,' Tidy said guardedly.

'I believe he has a lot of women.'

Tidy relented and came confidentially close. 'Miranda told me she met you at the club. She says you're all right. So I don't mind tellin' you. Yessir he does. Screws anything female that moves, so they say.'

'Nice for Miss Hall.'

'Her? I don't know about her,' Ernie said. 'She's a cool-headed one, she is. Kind of self-possessed.'

'I'd like to see Bronstein in Accounts.'

'I'll ring up for you, if you like, Mr Macy; but I don't think it will do much good.' He led Macy over to the reception desk.

'Can you see if Mr Bronstein in Accounts can see Mr Macy?'

The receptionist was puzzled. 'But I have orders—at least—this is the Mr Macy whom——'

'It is, dear,' Ernie said in a fatherly way; 'but see if Mr Bronstein will see him.'

The girl rang. They watched her lips narrow at the response from the other end of the wire. 'No,' she said emphatically.

'Well, I think I'll go out to Luton and see Captain Gray,' Macy said.

'I think the story will be the same there,' Tidy said. 'I don't know what you done, Mr Macy, but they sure don't want you round Libra.'

'Perhaps I got my hands on Mrs West,' Macy said.

'Ha! That's a good one! Like Brooks, eh? I tell you one thing, you're wastin' your time lookin' for Captain Gray at Luton. He's been suspended from duty.'

'The mighty fall frequently round here. What happened to him?'

'Nobody knows,' Ernie said.

'Except the Board and you, Ernie. What happened?'

'Well, since you're a friend of Miranda's, I'll tell you,' he replied, winking. 'The rumour is—though how true it is I don't know—that it's over trouble in Hong Kong. The crash. It was a bad business, and things were covered up——'

James Gray lived in a north London suburb of large old houses surrounded by well-kept lawns. His home had a high-gabled roof and ivy-covered walls. It was comfortable, luxurious in a discreet way. There were two cars in the drive and a light cabin cruiser on a trailer poking out of the garage.

Macy rang the front door bell and he was greeted by a thin worried-looking woman who spoke very quick, clipped English. Mrs Gray.

'I'm Steve Macy. I've been dealing with your husband on some inquiries by a United States bank——'

'You do know that he's not——'

'I know, Mrs Gray, and I thought I'd like to see him if you don't mind.'

'Of course not. Come in. Jim's out walking the dog at the moment. He'll be back soon.'

She led the way into a panelled study.

'This is an attractive room,' Macy said.

'The decoration's not actually finished, the curtains——'

'You haven't been here long?'

'About four months,' she said. 'I've been taking my time

doing things up. I don't know whether I'll need to bother now.'

'You mean because of your husband's job?'

He could see she was relieved at meeting someone who knew. And yet she was still hesitant. She was naturally protective.

'You aren't actually working for Libra?' she asked.

'I've nothing to do with them,' Macy said; 'except your husband was giving me certain information about their operations.'

She was satisfied with very little explanation. 'The house is very expensive ... as you can see. We need every bit of Jim's salary to run it. I don't know what we're going to do.'

'He's only been suspended——'

'We aren't fooled by that, Mr Macy. That's only temporary. They'll brush him off when they're ready. They don't care about the good work he's done, or his career.'

The subject brought colour to her cheeks and light to her eyes. She was more feminine, softer.

'There are other jobs,' Macy said confidently.

'Jim's too old for flying now, and this was his big step on the management side. He gave up a good job to join Libra, and they throw him out just because they don't like the truth!'

'The truth?' Macy asked.

'The truth about the Hong Kong crash. That's what it's all about. Jim wants them to tell the truth and not go making up stories to blame the control-tower people.'

'And what was the truth, Mrs Gray?' Macy asked again.

'Hadn't you better address questions like that to me?' Gray interrupted. He was standing in the doorway looking bulkier than ever in a crumpled woollen sweater.

'If you like,' Macy said with the most charming smile he could muster.

'I'm sorry, dear,' Mrs Gray said. 'I had no idea——'

'It doesn't matter,' her husband replied. 'Sit down,' he said to Macy, 'and I'll get you a drink.'

The smile had worked. And they were both on the same side now—against Libra.

Mrs Gray left them and they settled down in two armchairs with their whisky.

'You've been hearing all about my troubles ... I'll have to sell this place. Pity. It's what we've both worked for, for years. Just what we wanted, and we could just afford it—as long as I had the job with Libra.' He looked round at the old beams wistfully.

'It's a nice place. Personally I'm glad I'm not so attached to bricks and mortar.'

'Did Meg tell you? I'll never get another place like Libra. There are only three or four like it in the country and a queue a mile long for them. Nobody will want Libra's throw-outs.'

The big man was shattered. And all because he wanted to tell the truth. That was the most shattering thing of all.

'You'll get another job.'

'Sure I will. Something like book-keeping for an aero club. I can't go back to flying. I've been too long away now, and I'm too old. Flying's my only qualification, you see.'

'Libra are a tough crowd.'

'I hadn't realized how tough,' Gray said, his face a concentrated network of lines. 'I hadn't realized how tough. I didn't think they would touch me. I thought I was above any side-winds, as long as I did my job. And I did it well.'

'You must have known what they were like, the way they operate,' Macy said.

Gray focused his eyes on Macy steadily and then tossed down the whisky. 'I know. I could tell a few things....'

'Like how the air certificates for the crashed plane were fixed.'

'You know that?'

'Sure. It doesn't help me much.'

'I didn't think they'd use those methods on me,' Gray said.

'Why not? They used them on me. In Hong Kong. Set their thugs on me.'

Gray didn't deny it. 'You certainly had West worried,' Gray said. 'I don't know why. I thought it was because they couldn't ever reconcile to missing any point on anything, important or unimportant.'

'It was a pity you couldn't have helped me with those plane registrations,' Macy said. 'There's something screwy there.'

'As a matter of fact I remembered at least two of the air registration signs, and I checked them. I did it out of sheer rancour with Libra. They were our planes. They were taken out of service and sold.'

'Why?'

'New fleet, probably.'

'Who did you sell to?'

'I don't know,' Gray said.

'Which were the planes you checked?'

'G-AMAL and G-AVAL. A Douglas DC8 and a Boeing 727.'

'They shouldn't be on the list of Libra assets, should they?' Macy asked.

'I don't know. Suppose they were sold to a subsidiary?'

'Yeah. There's always an answer. That I've learned.'

'All I can tell you is that we delivered them to the airbrokers in Hong Kong, for sale.'

'Hong Kong?' Macy asked. 'Why there?'

'How would I know?'

24

Steve Macy stopped the cab near Grosvenor Square on the way back from Gray's and walked the three or four blocks to the Inn on the Park. He paused occasionally at the windows of small, elegant shops selling paintings and antiques. He could never buy; he was curious.

'So *there* you are,' a vaguely familiar woman's voice said with some irritation.

He looked up. She was standing square in front of him, her legs slightly apart, her hands on her hips. Her skirt was very short, and the leather coat lined with lambswool thrown defiantly open.

'They told me at the hotel you'd left.'

'Not me, Miranda. Without saying goodbye to you?'

She grinned in spite of herself. 'I wouldn't be surprised.'

'Never.'

Then she became serious again. 'There's no mistake, I'm sure. You are going, aren't you?'

'Not yet, though I guess there are some that would like me to go. Come inside and have a drink and we'll sort it out.'

'Okay,' she said.

Macy towed her into the foyer of the hotel and over to the desk. He was recognized as he approached.

'Ah, Mr Macy. I've had the porter put your things to one side in your room—you should have vacated by twelve,' the desk clerk said.

'Who says I'm going anywhere?'

The clerk adjusted his glasses. 'Your bill has been paid to noon, Mr Macy. I presume you know that.'

'I don't. I don't want to go.'

The clerk's lips turned down slightly, but he said nothing. He was used to dealing with crazy people.

'I'll continue my room for a couple of days,' Macy added, taking Miranda by the arm.

The clerk was bland, unconcerned. 'A moment please, Mr Macy. I'm afraid your room's been let. A late guest will be arriving in a couple of hours.'

'Then I'll take another room.'

'I'm sorry, we're full up.'

'Look, you're shifted me out of my room without my consent, because some jerk walks in here and pays the bill. I'll call the manager, I'll——'

'By all means,' the clerk said. 'Shall I call him for you?'

Macy looked at Miranda. She'd wilted.

'Never mind, Steve. We can go to my place.'

'That would be nice, Miranda, but I'll try an old piece of magic,' Macy said, reaching into his jacket pocket. He came out with something in his palm which he put flat on the desk before the clerk. He splayed his fingers enough for the figure twenty to be seen.

'It may be possible,' the clerk said; 'if you insist.'

'It doesn't seem worth that much to me,' Miranda said, seating herself in a chair in front of the long mirror.

She was nude. She opened her legs and looked curiously at herself in the mirror.

Macy was seated on the bed, sipping a whisky. Why disillusion the girl? 'I didn't get the room just to sleep with you, darling. I can use the telephone, too.'

'I feel great when I'm with you,' she said, and rubbed her belly slowly, lovingly.

She came across to him and began to unbutton his shirt. 'I don't know anything about you, though—as a person, that is.'

'What can I tell you about me? I practised law for a while with a big city firm in New York. I didn't like it. I practised law for a while with Libra. I didn't like it any better. Now I've got a bum practice on the West Side. I'm not sure whether I like it. I'm hard to please.'

'What I like about you is you're a mixed-up kinda guy,' she said, easing his trousers down. 'What about girls, Steve . . .?'

'Is this a time to talk about girls?'

'Why not?' she said, reaching her lips down to his groin.

'Maybe I ought to be drinking a chocolate malted,' he replied, rolling his eyes. 'Girls. Yes. Girls. My favourite is ten years old, and I cuddle her every chance I get. Other times I have long mad telephone conversations with her, or write long mad letters.'

She gave it up and lay down beside him. 'So you have a daughter.'

'Next in my gallery of girls is my ex-wife. Charming attractive, sexy. But not for me.'

'What happened?'

'It wore out. Or I wore it out. Or we grew apart. Put : cross in the box opposite your choice.'

She raised herself on one elbow and let her lips stray ove his chest; her hair hung down brushing him, and her warm full breasts nudged him as she moved.

'And?' she whispered.

'And sundry girls,' he said.

'Nobody special.'

Why deny it? 'One. Only a couple of years younger than me

Single. Never married. Very intelligent. Wrapped up in her career.'

'Pretty?'

'Quietly attractive.'

'Sexy?'

'Very.'

'Intelligent, eh?'

'Yes.'

'What does she have, Steve? I mean, *what* does she have?'

'You said it, Miranda.'

'You mean ...'

'She has a mature and dominating intelligence.'

Miranda was looking at him as though he was a sick patient. Beyond help. 'I don't have that, I think,' she said seriously, shaking her head.

'I told you this wasn't the time to talk ... you *do* have other things, Miranda.'

She laughed after a moment. 'I do,' she said, suddenly sitting up and spinning round so that she could throw her legs over his head as he lay back on the bed.

His head was caught in the deep soft odorous cleft of her thighs as she began to move in a rising storm.

It was four in the afternoon when Macy awoke. Miranda had gone. He just lay awake for a while on the bed feeling pretty good, and not caring a damn that he had missed a day when he might have made some useful inquiries.

Miranda had gone, leaving a few crumpled tissues on the floor and a smell of cheap scent, and he was facing the usual brick wall.

The first thing he did was to sit down at the desk with no clothes on and write a card to Christine, a funny one he'd bought in the foyer. The next thing was to put a cheque in an envelope for his ex-wife: he was a day overdue, and she'd be especially panicky knowing he was out of the country.

He was in the shower when the phone rang.

'Mr Klein calling Mr Macy from New York,' the operator said.

'Hullo, Herb. How ever did you find me? I checked out of here a day ago.'

'That's what I wanna know, Steve. What you playin'? I expected you back here by now.'

'I'm not quitting when I'm on to something.'

'Steve, Steve—it's too late. The deal's almost through. Orville is mad with you. What in hell'd you have to monkey with Mrs West for? He doesn't want to know about you.'

'He will when I come up with the goods on this crowd.'

'Nope. He's fired you and that's that. But there's something else worse. He's found out there was a big drawing from the Bank of America account after you'd been fired, but before they'd received the instructions to cancel your authority.'

'So what? I need funds to work with.'

'He doesn't see it that way. He sees it that you misappropriated the money. He's thinking of making a complaint——'

'Miserable old shit! Herb, do you know that West bitch hung herself round my neck at every chance she got, I think deliberately so I could be compromised——'

'You're a randy man, Steve——'

'Libra knows what Orville Prescott is like. Easiest possible way to get rid of me is to accuse me of some sexual impropriety.'

'I think that's goin' too far, Steve.'

'This West bitch has done the same thing before. There was a guy named Brooks. The financial controller. He started to make objections. Deirdre put her arms round his neck. Her husband caught them. He lost his job.'

'I'll tell Orville what you're doin', Steve. I'll cover for you best I can, but——'

'Thanks, Herb. There's something wrong with Libra. I'll find it out.'

'You ain't got too much time. And there's something wrong with most big corporations. All got skeletons in the cupboard. I don't know whether——'

'Thanks a million, Herb. See you.'

Steve Macy went back to the shower to contemplate his brick wall.

25

Steve Macy walked briskly along Linda's side of Bryanston Square in the dusk, and went up to her apartment. He had to lean on the buzzer.

Linda didn't open the door wide, and showed no particular expression on her composed face. 'I thought you'd left town.'

'I couldn't go without seeing you.'

She smiled.

'I mean it.'

'I believe it. You won't take no for an answer.'

'Stubborn.'

'I hear you've been fired.'

'And you've heard what for.'

'I don't care what for.'

'I think you do.'

'Fooling with Deirdre West is what I'd expect of you. I can imagine you found it difficult to keep your hands off her and eventually didn't. I don't blame you or her. You're both made that way.'

'And so are you. If it pleases you, you see nothing wrong——'

'I hope I'm a little more discriminating,' she said, drawing herself up and emphasizing the compact figure that, of all bodies, affected him so much.

'Aren't you going to ask me in?'

'I've tried to tell you that this isn't a prairie ranch where you can call in when you like.'

'I see. It isn't convenient.'

It wasn't only the body either. It was just as he'd told Miranda: behind those calm, exquisitely feminine eyes was a strong mind.

'I guess I better go then,' he said quietly.

'Please.'

'Think about what I said to you before——'

'About us?' she asked. She moved her lips reflectively. 'I'll think about it, but——'

'I'll be waiting.'

'But it can't be yet. . . .'

She spoke quite tenderly but with an impression of having weighed many things carefully.

'I'll be around,' he said, retreating from the doorway, and from the strength of purpose behind her words.

'When are you leaving London, Steve?' she asked on a different, lighter note, as she too turned away.

'I'm not. I'm staying. I've a job to do.'

'But I thought——'

'The Libra spies were wrong,' he said.

She inclined her head questioningly. She had become the complete businesswoman.

He was not going to satisfy her, and raised his hand in a salute of farewell.

The door of the apartment had swung open, and there was the blur of a figure behind her, and a voice, a man's voice, heavy, masculine and smooth. 'Linda, honey, what's keeping you . . .?'

Steve Macy had turned away and was heading down the stairs as the door clicked closed on Linda and the man, and the smooth-toned words 'what's keeping you?' echoed in his ears as he descended, spoken not entirely in an English, nor yet an American accent.

'What's keeping you?' he asked himself as he came out of the building.

The porter who was standing in front of a car, carelessly parked to block one of the entrance-ways, overheard him, and fixed him with a baleful eye.

The porter was glad to have somebody to witness his rage. He cursed audibly.

Macy noted the elegant Corniche Rolls-Royce, in white, with the hood folded down. 'Whose is it?' he asked.

The porter glared darkly. He was a man who would impart no news of anything at all except the weather in normal circumstances. 'Mr Harry Bloody Beech, that's who . . .!'

In the cocktail bar at the Inn on the Park Steve Macy ruminated about the state of the nation. He assisted the process by a series of bourbon highballs.

Maybe Linda had been the most important part of the assignment. He crossed her off.

He was a loser. A bum. Or little better. She was flying high with guys like Beech. Harry Beech himself. Linda was a really powerful woman and she could handle a Harry Beech, if anyone could. Why in hell should she bother with Steve Macy?

He took another long drink. Linda had that curious intelligence. She'd want to know what made a Harry Beech tick. She'd want to know how he could build something a thousand times as big as anybody else, starting from nothing. She'd want to know what books he read, who his friends were. She'd admire his piratical qualities. She'd get to really *understand* Harry Beech, and then he'd be in her power.

Steve Macy drew on his cigarette and ordered more bourbon. Harry Beech was one hell of a lucky guy.

He bought one for the barman. Next point: Libra were a load of self-protective, unscrupulous thugs. They'd kill or ruin him if necessary. But so what?

What were the hard facts? The hard facts were that Libra were up to funny business with ten planes which they'd shown on their list of assets supplied to First Bankers. The odds were they'd been involved in some sort of swindle with subsidiary or associated companies. As Klein said, every company has its skeletons.

Macy crushed out his cigarette. There were ten different explanations at least which Libra could produce out of the hat to satisfy any complaint by First Bankers.

'Having another, Mr Macy?' the barman asked.

'I've gotten nowhere,' Steve Macy muttered.

'Right, sir,' the barman said, fixing the drink.

Macy slid off the stool. He threw a note on the counter. 'Finish it yourself,' he said.

He weaved through the lounge to the desk.

'Get me on a morning flight to New York, will you?'

'Yes sir. I'll arrange the booking right away and call your room to confirm. You'll be there?'

'Nowhere else I want to go.'

26

Macy kicked off his shoes, loosened his tie, and threw his jacket over a chair. He lay on the bed in his room under the arc of the reading lamp with the latest novel on big business.

He didn't know where the share-rigging deals ended and sleep began.

The telephone jangled him into life. The hotel was deadly quiet. The room was precisely the same as when he lay down on the bed; the lamp still burned; the once fresh highball on the night table remained untouched; but everything was somehow older. He was older. And his mouth felt lousy.

Macy groped for the receiver. 'Who is it?'

The bland voice of the desk clerk came through with a certain tone of pleasure at his hearer's confusion. 'I have your reservation, sir——'

'Why the—what time is it?'

'Eleven o'clock, Mr Macy. You asked me to call.'

'Okay. So what's the news?'

'You have a reservation on Libra Flight 520 leaving Heathrow tomorrow at 12.15 for New York. That's a Jumbo Jet Flight——'

'Thanks. Good night——'

'One thing, sir,' the clerk carried on imperturbably. 'Somebody to see you.'

Pause. Silence. Macy sniffed the stale highball.

'I believe it's important, sir,' the clerk said with sufficient concern to earn a tip from the party at the other end.

'You sure took your time in announcing it.'

'I'm sorry, sir——'

'Never mind. You have to enjoy your job.'

'I beg your pardon, sir?'

'Tell whoever it is, I've turned in for the night.'

'The party says it's connected with Libra.'

'Who is it? What name?'

'The party won't give a name, sir.'

'What sex?' Macy asked suspiciously.

'It's a-a-a-a gentleman.'

'You must have got a good tip!'

The clerk choked in confusion. Macy relented.

'Tell the "gentleman" to come up. No. Wait a minute. I'll come down.'

Macy slipped into his shoes, ran a hand through his hair, and started for the foyer.

He couldn't see anybody who might be waiting for him when he got there. The place was clear at this time of night. He began to move over towards the desk.

'Hullo, Steve.' The blonde head of Deirdre West turned up towards him from a deep couch.

Macy didn't smile. 'You.'

'It was Deirdre, last time, Big Man.'

'What gives, Deirdre?' Macy asked tiredly.

'I was on my way to the Cassandra, and I thought I'd call in.' She gave him that crystal-clear amused look.

'Where's your husband?'

'Oh, he's at his boring business.'

'He's in Hong Kong, isn't he?'

'Yes, I believe he is. Making up to some little Oriental thing. I don't keep a check on his movements any more, Steve.'

Macy stood over her. The clear, green eyes weren't quite so clear now. 'Why all the "gentleman to see you" stuff?'

'A joke, Steve. You like a joke, don't you? I thought I'd surprise you.'

'Well, you haven't.'

'You're not the kind of man that surprises easily,' she said, hunching her shoulders pleasurably.

The voluptuous aura of the woman almost made him sweat; but he wasn't going to show it. 'What about the Libra business? Was that a joke? You said you came here on Libra business.'

'I find that some men are at least as much drawn to their work as to a beautiful woman, so I thought I'd try that, too,' she laughed.

'What makes you think Libra is my work?'

There seemed to be an instant, merely an instant, of seriousness in those innocent, almost vacuous, eyes. 'You told

me, or Richard told me, or somebody. Don't you work for Libra, or against them, or with them, or something?'

It was no use questioning her. She would continue to hide behind feminine stupidity whenever it suited. She would deny everything. There could be no confrontation.

She stood up effortlessly, her long, supple body easily occupying a space incredibly close to him without touching, and without any sense of having thrust itself into position.

'Why don't you come over to the Club with me. For an hour. Keep me company?'

'I was going to bed,' Macy replied. 'As a matter of fact——'

The woman was beginning to burn inside him like a sudden swallow of brandy. She was less than half a step away. His arms were about to envelop her. Her encouraging lips, parted on the white teeth, were so near.

'I'll come up to your room while you change,' she said.

They turned together in the direction of the lifts. His hand was unconsciously resting on her arm. Her thigh brushed against him as she swayed.

In that instant he absorbed all her delicate curves and swellings, the texture of her burnished skin, the heat of her breath, the pinkness of her tongue....

Macy halted. 'No I can't. I'm sorry. I have to ... get an early night.'

The ecstatic cocoon that had embraced them both for a few seconds was ruptured.

She looked at him as freshly as though she'd stepped out of a cold shower. 'Suit yourself. We could make it lunch tomorrow, but——'

'But what?'

'You're going back to New York. I could hardly help hearing the reception clerk....'

'So I am.'

'Why not get a later plane? Stay another day, Steve. I'm completely free.'

'I don't know....'

'You're free, aren't you?'

'You mean, you know I've been fired?'

'I don't know anything, Big Man, except I'd like to see more of you.'

She leaned towards him, her hair brushing his cheek, and slid the fingers of one hand inside his shirt.

'I get the feeling you want to keep me here.'

'You've got it, Steve. I do.'

'You and your husband and Harry Beech.'

The lucid eyes searched his face. 'That's drivel, Steve.'

'Is it?'

She was very sure of herself. She went on massaging his chest with her fingers. 'Don't you like me a teeny weeny bit, Big Man,' she said.

Steve Macy was quite cool now. 'I can't be bought off that easily, that's all.'

Her open hand slapped his face so hard that the room dissolved for a moment into strange, moving patches of light. The rings on her fingers struck hard against his cheekbone.

He shakily raised his hand to touch the sore spot. People were staring. Deirdre West was a flash of blonde mane at the glass doors ten yards away.

As his head cleared, the images that were left were Deirdre's jaunty buttocks as she had stalked away from him, and the floor of that lift in Hong Kong with the razor-sharp file flashing in the corner of his eye....

Steve Macy examined his cheek in the bathroom mirror. She hit hard. There was a cut and a bruised swelling. Perhaps he had touched the right nerve: she was trying to compromise him even further, and above all to keep him in London.

He dabbed some iodine on the cut. It made sense. Libra were hysterically protective. They had attacked him; they had done everything they could, in an unobtrusive way, to obstruct his report. You could say that Deirdre was just an undiscriminating whore who happened to get mixed up in things, or you could note that she was the one who had finally discredited him and got him sacked.

Steve Macy climbed into bed with a large neat Scotch. And if he was right, Libra were still worried by him ... because he'd told Linda he was going on working?

He drew on a last cigarette. The liquor was good; it brought back his natural optimism. London hadn't been as rough as Hong Kong, but whichever way he turned the trail led to Hong Kong: the plane crash, the fight over March's papers, the big new consortium—Hong Kong was where West and his cronies—and probably Beech—were now, and the First Bankers people too. Hong Kong was where the crashed plane was bound for on its last flight, and where at least two of the missing planes had been sent....

It was worth a try. What had he to lose?

This time the desk clerk was the sleepy one. Macy identified himself. 'I want to change my plane reservation. I want a flight via Hong Kong. Would you get someone to work on it first thing in the morning, and call me at nine with the information? Get the earliest flight you can.'

'This will be a more expensive flight,' the clerk said. 'Are you sure——'

'No kidding,' Macy replied. 'For this detour, I don't mind.'

27

Hong Kong

The road from the city-centre of Hong Kong island climbs steeply and quickly out of the press of tall buildings and ramshackle huts to become a country road, edged in places with hibiscus, rhododendron and cherry blossom.

Set back at the end of long drives and tucked behind secluded shoulders of hillside are elaborate houses which can only be glimpsed fleetingly through the trees. The upper levels of the island are a different world, a quiet, sunny, exclusive world.

The road comes over a headland and is confronted by the curl of Repulse Bay with its old, rambling, palm-fringed hotel, a cluster of high-rise apartments looking out to sea. The bay is wide with a shallow sandy beach.

On this particular day, at noon, a large motor yacht came into the mouth of the bay and anchored a quarter of a mile

offshore. She was a pleasure craft for long-distance cruising, a high radar-equipped bridge aft, and a sun deck forward with a candy-striped awning.

The yacht dispatched a motor boat to shore with one of the crew. He met a group of people on the beach, sheltering under parasols and sun-hats, for even the spring sun is harsh.

The motor boat cut a creamy line back and forth to the yacht three times to deliver the passengers. The yacht weighed anchor and moved into the distance with a stately deliberation that hardly disturbed the surface of the sea.

The China Sea was a vast tract of translucent green, dotted with islands. The motor yacht became one of the hundreds of craft that crawled over it: launches, speedboats, junks, dories, mere black dots like flies in the sun.

After sailing for more than an hour, the yacht headed for a small uninhabited island, a crescent of rock topped by a patch of grass and some stunted trees. But within the crescent was a white beach and deep, clear water.

The party on the yacht began to stir themselves when she was at anchor. A man appeared in bright swimming trunks and dropped over the side. Another dived from the bow cage with a cry of delight. The motor boat was brought from its position in tow, alongside, and people began to scramble down a ladder to load it.

Davits at the stern of the yacht swung over the water to lower the gleaming hull of a speedboat; its engines were soon whining as it arrogantly lathered the flat calm round its parent.

On deck, a Chinese in a white jacket, carrying a silver tray of champagne glasses, moved as imperturbably among the deck chairs as if he had been serving in the lounge of the Peninsula.

Richard West stretched and patted his bare chest. He was getting a tan. He waved the champagne away. 'It makes my head ache, too early in the day. Bring me a gin and tonic.'

'Champagne would have been exactly right, Richard,' Dasilva said. 'The lobster we're having for lunch is superb, I promise. It needs champagne for full appreciation.'

Dasilva, surprisingly youthful, lean and fit, with the perpetual tan of his race, in bathing trunks, reclined opposite

him and smiled with an inwardness that comprehended all the pleasures at his command.

'Richard has no soul,' Challis said, taking a glass of champagne.

Challis was disturbed by the heat. He was not at home in a sun-shirt and shorts. His white arms and legs poked out spiderishly.

'No soul at all,' Richard West agreed. He was beginning to enjoy himself. He was definitely beginning to feel at ease. He had come a long way, figuratively, to sit on this deck, to be surrounded by agreeable things, and he was going to drink what he chose. In a day, tomorrow, his personal wealth would be assured. He would be untouchable, Libra or no Libra, Deirdre or no Deirdre.

'I must say I like the toys you have, Dasilva. Very much,' he said.

Dasilva talked about his toys with the unaffectedness of the really rich. 'The trouble with a yacht, Richard, is that it's either too big or too small for the things you want to do with it. I go to Manila with my family, and then I say, why don't we go to the Mediterranean? But then I say, I need something bigger if we are going to be there weeks or months rather than days. Then we have all the trouble of looking round for the right ship....'

'Why don't you hire what you want?' Challis asked.

'Sometimes I do—but I like to have my own craft. I don't want to be a passenger on somebody else's.'

Richard West finished off his gin and took up the binoculars lying on the deck near his chair. 'I feel for your problem,' he said, as he scanned the beach.

He could see the speedboat had been grounded. The bathers were clustered in a group, taking refreshment. Evan Cooper was there, unmistakable with his corn-yellow curls. He had his arm round the shoulders of a Chinese boy.

'Yes,' Dasilva said, 'I think the scene—shall we call it the scene?—is suitable for tomorrow's performance, eh?'

'I'd prefer it in my room at the Mandarin,' Challis replied.

'I have no soul, and Challis has no sense of occasion,' West said.

'Of course we must have the right setting, Philip,' Dasilva replied. 'This is the right setting. Prescott expects sedate Eastern luxury. He must have it.'

Challis turned his head to take in two girls who leaned attractively on the rails of the yacht a few yards away.

'Including stark-naked Chinese whores?' he asked.

'You are a little unkind to my naked friends,' Dasilva said.

'It would be a mistake to have them here,' West said. 'Prescott is a bible-carrying Protestant. He's quite capable of stealing your purse if he can call it a deal, or charging interest at three hundred per cent, but sex is dirty. And people who like sex are dirty.'

'I'm surprised you gentlemen so underestimate me,' Dasilva said. 'I know of Prescott and Klein and Ullman. I know what they will think fitting. The boys and girls of today are for your pleasure, for our pleasure.'

'Where's Cooper?' Challis said. 'He ought to be here, discussing the final details.' He peered towards the beach.

'I think Mr Cooper has found himself a young friend,' Dasilva answered.

'Damn you and your Oriental pleasures,' Challis retorted. 'Why the hell can't we confine ourselves to business?'

For the first time, West saw Dasilva's eyebrows go up in genuine surprise, exposing the full circles of the deep brown eyes.

Challis's eyes were in contrast nearly closed in the brightness. He mopped his neck with a handkerchief. 'Pardon me, please. It's the heat....'

West caught a gesture from the Portuguese skipper who was approaching along the deck, a neat, bearded man in white with a white-peaked cap. He took the opportunity to leave, and rose to meet the skipper.

But he could not resist a parting shot. He swung the binoculars across and dropped them into Challis's lap. 'Cooper's on the beach,' he said. 'Take a look.'

'There's a radio message for you, sir. Coming through now,' the skipper said to West.

West followed him to the control room below the high bridge. The Chinese operator handed him a message form.

'The message has been checked,' the operator said.

MACY PLANNED TO LEAVE LONDON THIS MORNING FOR NEW YORK STOP HE CHANGED THE BOOKING FOR A MORNING FLIGHT TO HONG KONG STOP HE INSISTS HE IS STILL WORKING ON THE CASE STOP DISCREET INQUIRY ON TELEPHONE TO NEW YORK INDICATES HIS EMPLOYERS. NOT NOW EMPLOYING HIM
LINDA HALL

The steward was at West's elbow with another gin and tonic. West took it, and gulped. With the slight movement of the boat, the gin, and the blinding knives of sunlight from the water, it was difficult to think; it was difficult to summon in an instant all the details necessary to handle this ... this gadfly, this gnat, this buzzing bloody nuisance.

He descended the companionway to the air-conditioned lounge, where it was quieter, and not so bright. His attention was taken by a movement in one of the forward cabins, visible from the open doors at the end of the cabin.

A Chinese girl hovered over one of the bunks. Her sun-tanned and oiled skin made nakedness seem a natural state; she bore no discernible marks where her swimsuit had been. Her figure was slight, but beautifully moulded; her back arched over the man below her, her small buttocks taut.

West could not mistake the man, and he paused, silent, the radio message forgotten momentarily. Even the curtain of ebony hair from the girl's head did not quite obscure Poynton's face. It was a face transformed from its usual plump blandness. The nostrils were distended, the lips protruded, the eyes, usually so skilfully hidden in folds of fat, shone like two bright marbles.

Poynton was sweating and groaning as though he was dying of fever.

West became conscious of the paper in his hand, the unsteadiness of the boat, the meeting planned for tomorrow, Prescott ... and that pest Macy. And the obscene, flatulent noises of Poynton's pleasure.

'Can't you close the door, you fat slob?' West said.

Poynton hoisted himself on to one elbow, blinking myopically without his spectacles. The girl sprang away, revealing the flabby white hulk with its central forest of black hair.

'I say——' Poynton began.

The girl wiggled her hips provocatively at West, poked out her tongue and slammed the door in his face.

'What was the message, Richard?' Challis asked, coming gratefully into the cool of the cabin.

Richard West passed the paper over. The cadaverous face that confronted him when it was raised from the paper had regained the authority it had lost in the misery of the heat.

'Do you realize what this means?' Challis asked.

'I realize Macy may try to see Prescott here in Hong Kong, or perhaps Ullman and try to put them off——'

'Precisely. And you assured me that you had made plans that would keep Macy out of Hong Kong, especially at this critical time.'

'Relax. He can't do much. What can he say?'

'As usual, Richard, you speak with complete assurance, but I am not assured. Macy is hanging on. Macy is still a threat.'

'He's been fired.'

'He apparently doesn't accept that. And I don't like it. It's the dogged action of a man who believes——'

'How can a man who's been fired have authority with his bosses necessary to stop this kind of deal? Be realistic, Challis. This isn't the sale of a second hand car. Remember who Macy is. He's a bum lawyer pulled in to patch up somebody else's job,' West said, talking himself into perspective and feeling better. He laughed and clapped Challis on the shoulder.

'You couldn't even keep him out of Hong Kong,' Challis said bitterly.

'I thought my arrangements were sufficient, but in any event, Macy doesn't worry me.'

'If Linda Hall's information is right, Macy is either playing games with us, or he's discovered something at the last minute to make him change his plans.'

'Not necessarily, Challis,' West said, drawing on one of his thin cigars. 'Macy has been sacked. He planned to pack up

and go home. He knows this is where the party is, and he's decided to come here on a chance....'

'Then he's dangerous.'

'He has to be watched, I agree.'

'Watched ...' Challis echoed, his lips curling.

'He ought not to see Prescott & Co....' West mused in a pungent blue cloud.

Steve Macy hit a wad of hot air that was as hard to breathe as cotton wool when he came out of the cabin of the Tri-Star. He descended to the tarmac, winked at the pretty hostess waiting there, and started to follow the crowd across to the terminal.

The heat came burning up through the soles of his shoes. He crumpled up his face in the bright light. He could feel the sweat breaking out all over his body although he had only walked a matter of yards. The first thing he was going to do when he got to the hotel was build a very, very large gin and tonic.

Then he was going to think about exactly what he should do. He couldn't put it off any longer.

He cleared Immigration quickly. American tourists were welcome. Some tour!

The passengers waited dismally with their heads down, like a herd of cows, for their luggage to start moving along one of the conveyor belts. They herded together in the vast, bare room. Macy stood apart, leaning against a wall, smoking.

The loudspeaker was burbling away, had been all the time he had been there. And then it penetrated: 'Calling Mr Steven Macy, passenger on flight 406 ... calling Mr Steven Macy ... please report to the airline desk as you leave the Customs hall....'

Macy rescued his grip and went through the 'nothing to declare' gate. A polite officer stopped him.

'So I have a dishonest face.'

'Just routine, sir.'

A quart of Scotch and a packet of cigars rested on his blue silk dressing gown when he opened the suitcase. The officer

bent down and sniffed. He picked up the case and felt the weight.

He was looking for dope or gold and Macy had neither. The officer waved Macy on.

The airline desk was on the left, near the exit from the hall. Two or three people waited there, scrutinizing the passengers as they came past. Macy could see his name listed on the board as one who had to collect a message.

It was odd, that message. Who knew he was on this flight?

A Chinese wearing a khaki denim jacket stepped in front of the passenger who preceded Macy. 'Excuse me, sir. Mr Macy?'

'That's me,' Steve Macy said, before the passenger had time to reply.

The Chinese beckoned him over to the desk. 'You have message.'

Macy took a scrap of paper from the Libra hostess behind the desk:

RING ME URGENTLY
REGARDS
LINDA

The 'regards': that was what struck him, made something inside him twist. Were they real regards, or was it the usual formality one put on a cable?

'You have reserves at Heelton Hotel, yes?' said the Chinese in the denim jacket.

'Sure, but——'

'I from Heelton Hotel. Have badge. Take you there.' The man produced a badge in a leather folder, but Macy was only half attentive.

'Wait a minute,' he said, turning to the girl at the desk. 'When did this message come? Where did it come from? It has no details on it.'

The girl took the paper back and glanced at it wisely. 'Ordinary message,' she pronounced. 'Received on airport telex. Don't you know the number of the sender?'

'I do but——'

'What's your problem then?' the girl interjected in her harsh English. 'You have the message on arrival of your flight, and you know the number to call.'

'Never mind ...' Macy shrugged.

The little man in denims nodded sympathetically at him and trotted a half yard in front, as Macy walked, jerking his head round frequently to make sure Macy was there.

The pair pushed through the crowded concourse where chauffeurs, holding up notice boards announcing various hotels, waited for their passengers.

Outside the main doors of the terminal was a wide road crammed with buses and taxis and knots of people and piles of luggage; it was shady too, because another equally wide road ran over the top to give access to upper floors of the building.

Macy saw a bus marked Hilton Hotel and began to thread his way across to it.

'No This way,' the little man said. 'I have hotel car. More comfortable. Too many people come. Send bus. Send cars too.'

Then Macy remembered his suitcase. In the fuss about the message he'd put it down....

'This way please.'

Macy followed the man with sudden relief as he noticed the case at the man's side. The Chinese was ten yards in front, beckoning him across the road.

'Regards, Linda'. What did she mean? What did she want? He pushed his hands down inside his trouser pockets and slumped forward in thought.

The roadway was under his eye, the roadway in the region of his toes, blackened with oil and rubbed smooth by the friction of tyres. Linda ... amongst all the clack and chatter and hum of different motors, he heard one, quite close, more urgent than the rest, a motor winding up frantically ... and as he raised his head he heard, too, a high-pitched exclamation of alarm from a Chinese man——

His hands came out of his pockets as though he was drawing a pair of six-guns, and he spun round: a green Mercedes had snaked out from the kerb across to the wrong side of the road,

and was bearing down on him with the motor screaming.

He could see the man bent over the wheel, his face tense with determination. The car leaped towards him with paralysing speed. He was off balance. He couldn't wrench himself to right or left. His muscles turned to ice.

The cry of the frightened spectator came to him again during the interminable moment while he tried to gather the strength to move ... and the hysterical scream of the motor and its stifling breath of hot steel.

Then he was launched sideways, rolling in the air like a pole-vaulter, smashing shoulder and hip on to the pavement six inches from the kerb, almost touching the sidewalls of the Mercedes' tyres as they scrabbled against the high kerb trying to mount ... and then jagged lightning, petrol fumes and pain seeping into the darkness ...

'You all right, old chap?' the English accent inquired.

Macy was comforted by the presence of the portly gentleman in a blue chalk stripe, with a club tie, who gazed benignly down at him.

'Superb,' he replied.

'Let me help you up. Dust you off. Can't expect the locals to help. Worse things are, the less notice they take,' the Englishman said, proffering a fat hand. 'Result of two thousand years of minding their own business.'

'Ahhh,' Macy groaned. 'I think some of them have been minding mine.' He stood up. His shoulder and hip and elbow on the left side were numb.

'Have to be more careful,' the portly gentleman said.

'I shall have to be incredibly careful,' Macy said. 'Tell me, was he on the wrong side of the road or am I an Olympic athlete?'

'By jove, he was too. Still you expect that here, at the airport. Drive anywhere. Drive across the runway to get a fare, some of these chaps.'

'You mean it was a taxi?' Macy asked.

'Indeed yes. Driver probably half blind. Eye trouble. Most of them have bad eyes. No proper medical check. Menaces.' The man brushed Macy's coat. 'Going rather fast, too,' he said.

'I can manage now. Thanks,' Macy said, feeling his hip gingerly, while the traffic flowed past absorbing the endless crowds exuded by the terminal.

It was as though nothing had happened. But something had happened. His throbbing side told him so.

'Cheerio,' the man said. 'Better luck next time.'

Macy's senses were still jellied by the impact ... the little man in denims ... he must get to the bus.

But the Chinese in denims was not in sight. And a few yards away, set neatly beside a concrete pillar, was his grip.

The little man had done his job and departed.

The little man could not have missed him at the airport because he had to call for the message....

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The Chinese had long, delicate fingers. He removed the gold cigarette holder from his mouth and expelled a lungful of smoke gently from his pursed lips.

'I much regret I cannot help you, Mr Macy. We cannot talk about our clients' affairs.'

'Then Libra is a client?' Macy asked.

The Chinese smiled indulgently and touched the knot of his silk tie. 'I cannot even go so far as to confirm that.'

The Chinese sat stock-still, with perfect politeness. The interview was over.

'But you're not going to deny it?' Macy said doggedly.

'I don't wish to confirm or deny it, Mr Macy. Dasilva & Co. is a very old firm. People in Hong Kong have confidence in our discretion. They trust us with their banking and insurance affairs. The buying and selling of ships and aircraft is only a small, secondary part of our activities, but we like to apply the same discretion, the same sense of confidentiality....'

'I'll find out what you did with those two planes,' Macy grated, annoyed at the oily superiority of the slim, erect figure behind the desk.

The fan turned monotonously overhead. The draft made

the potted palms quiver. The two men faced each other in the shady, panelled room. Shafts of light slanted in from the glaring sun outside, split by the Venetian blind.

The Chinese maintained the faintest smile.

Steve Macy rubbed his hand through his hair. 'The hell with you,' he said, as he made for the door.

On the street he took no chances.

He put his shoulder into the crowd on the narrow footpath and forced himself on for a few yards; then he abruptly left the crowd and ran down an alleyway to the waterfront. He waved one of the four or five taxis cruising for a fare.

The cab threaded through the city and took him a short distance up the hill to the Central Government Offices. The traffic was clearer. He was sure he was not being followed.

The air crash Inspector remembered him; the same cavernous eyes rested on Macy, waiting for an explanation. The air-conditioning made the room unbearably cold. Macy could feel the chill of the sweat on his body after his recent exertions.

'I'm afraid I can't give you any information about the crash. My report's not complete yet——'

'It's something else. You may be able to help me. I want to track down a couple of planes that came into the Colony——'

'There is a record, of course, but you'd need to know approximately when....'

'And is there a record when they go?'

'Certainly, the destination, the operator, and so on. All these things are logged.'

Herbert Klein contemplated the salted peanuts in the palm of his hand. It was easier than looking at Steve Macy.

'Steve, what you're telling me is—kinda—unbelievable.'

Macy sipped the gin and tonic and let his head rest back against the wall of the Captain's Bar at the Mandarin Hotel.

'I tell you the bastards tried to knock me off. Why else would the decoy, who said he was from the Hilton, run off and leave my suitcase? Why in hell didn't he wait round if he was a genuine chauffeur from the hotel?'

Klein shook his head in bewilderment, and threw the palmful of peanuts into his mouth.

'Can you understand how ... how screwy this looks from where I sit, Steve?'

'The Hilton never sent a chauffeur, anyhow. I checked. And they don't have anyone who resembles the little guy who picked me up.'

'I need another drink. Quickly,' Herbert Klein said. 'A double.'

'When's the big day? When are you handing over the dough?'

'Tomorrow. We have some work to do tonight, but tomorrow we're going out on José Dasilva's yacht. It's going to be very grand and colourful. Only trouble is, I'm a bad sailor.'

'Dasilva?' Macy asked. 'Isn't that the banker, and incidentally the guy who is supposed to have handled the valuation and disposal of Libra planes?'

'I don't know, Steve. I guess he would have some business connection with Libra. He's putting a lot of money into the consortium. He's a very big man in the East. Kinda aristocrat.'

Klein looked little and crumpled in his lightweight suit. He lapsed into private thought, his brow heavily creased.

'What can I do?' he complained, finally. 'What do you expect? Call it all off? Seriously. Is that what you expect? Because because you nearly got run down by a taxi?'

'Put things together, Herb,' Macy persisted

'I am putting them together, and what I get is a fairly healthy sort of deal....'

Steve Macy's hip and shoulder still ached. 'It's your show....'

'Otville won't listen, Steve. He doesn't want to talk about you. Kinda stares at me when I start talkin' about you until I've finished and then goes on with somethin' else. He don't want to know.'

'I don't know why I go on,' Macy said.

'Neither do I, Steve. Woulda been better if you'd come home when I first said. Wouldn'ta been all this trouble about thievin' the bank money.'

'I guess I do know why I go on. I'm not going to let these thugs beat me.'

Klein shook his head gloomily. 'I like you, Steve, but quit, will you? Go home.'

Steve Macy was seated at the desk in his hotel room. He had a piece of notepaper before him on which he had written:

G-AMAL Douglas DC8: ceased Libra operations early 1973
G-AVAL Boeing 727: ... ... mid 1973

The two planes were the ones Gray had checked in London. They had been sold. The dates Gray had supplied from his memory when Macy called him on the telephone.

He probably had enough information to find the planes in the civil aviation records.

Then his call to Linda came through.

'What can I do for you, Steve?'

'No. What can I do for you?'

'I don't get it, Steve.'

'You called me. Left a message at the airport in Hong Kong asking me to ring you.'

'I did not.'

'That's the message I got.'

'There must be a mistake. I never left that message.'

'I'm glad.'

'Why?'

'Because whoever left that message intended it as a means of identifying me so I could be set up for—for an accident.'

'Oh no.'

The genuine concern in her voice touched him.

'And it happened. A little man nearly led me under the wheels of a taxi....'

'Are you sure it wasn't an accident?'

'Quite sure.'

'I—I might as well say—I liked seeing you again.'

'It hasn't all gone, then?'

There was a long pause, and he was almost going to speak.

'No,' she said.

The one word, the one lone word, was so full, so meaningful to him.

'You're all right aren't you?' she asked.
'A few bruises. That's all. I'll see you when this is over.'

It was past one in the morning and the room was thick with cigar smoke when the meeting in Prescott's suite at the Mandarin Hotel finally broke.

Richard West was in his shirtsleeves, his tie loose, his hair tousled. Under his forearms rested two piles of detailed contracts and schedules. He had concentrated on them for four hours at a stretch, and this was the first moment he had to sit back and study the people in the room. For four hours they had been voices, minds probing his mind.

Challis was tired and bored. He stood up and yawned.

Evan Cooper had only been on the sidelines. He was on the telephone ordering refreshments.

Klein, Prescott's lawyer, was a careful, useful man. West had silently cursed Klein for picking out one or two problems from the small print. The man had studied the papers as carefully as he had, blast him. And Klein was continuing to quote short sightedly, taking no notice of the relaxation of the others. But he had thrashed the deal out, and it was a good one ... Klein or no Klein.

Dasilva hadn't contributed much. He seemed to be more concerned to make polite conversation and tell anecdotes of Eastern life. It was going to cost him dear.... Dasilva should have paid more attention; he would wake up later to the rather harsh effect of one or two clauses in the documents.

Orville Prescott himself was as sharp as a diamond and twice as hard. He showed no sign of tiredness. His eyes darted enthusiastically, his hands gestured. He talked. He was a worthy opponent.

'There are one or two small things for Herb and me to touch on tomorrow, but essentially only the formalities of signature of the documents remain,' Richard West said.

He took a cup of coffee from the tray offered to him. The raw, sugarless draught brought back the excitement of his own independence. He was going to be a wealthy man. A very wealthy man.

'It's not only signature of the documents,' Challis said in

his urbane way; 'there is, I believe, a first draft of fifteen million dollars to change hands at the same time. It's what brought me, reluctantly, to Hong Kong.'

'Most assuredly,' Prescott smiled. 'Herb has made arrangements for us to pick up the draft from the local office in the morning.'

'I don't think the amended documents will be retyped before, say, 11.30,' Richard West said.

'I suggest we embark about noon, gentlemen,' Dasilva said.

'Hope the weather ain't rough,' Klein added.

'Flat calm. Like glass. I promise you. And the best champagne in the world,' Dasilva said.

'There's one thing,' Prescott said, and the others looked at him. 'What about Mr Beech?'

'Harry's in Singapore,' Richard West answered. 'His plane gets into Kai Tak at ten in the morning.'

'In plenty of time for the champagne,' Dasilva said

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'No luck?' the clerk said, putting his head round the door.

'None,' Macy admitted, dropping the log book on to the pile of similar books in front of him.

'Let me see. What are you looking for?'

The young clerk came in and sat down. He couldn't have been more than twenty. A kid straight out from England. But bright and keen.

'This plane here,' Macy said, showing a slip of paper to the boy, 'a Douglas DC8 with the sign G-AMAL came into Hong Kong early in 1973. I'm damned if I can find the entry anywhere.'

'And the other one?' the clerk asked.

'That too. I've just started to look for it. No dice.' Macy's head thumped. The room was stifling. The sun was clawing at the windows.

The clerk flicked over the closely written pages with a curious kind of authority. This was something he knew about. Macy watched, depressed and befuddled.

'I'll try the 727 in mid-May 1973,' the clerk said, drawing a sure finger down the columns as his eye followed.

'Here it is,' the clerk said, turning to him without surprise.

'As easy as that?'

'I'm more used to using the logs than you are.'

'Well, can you find where it went out?' Macy asked with an admiring smile.

'Okay then,' the clerk said. 'It's not exactly my job, but I can spare a few minutes.'

He began to search. The finger travelled down column after column, book after book. He never looked up until he pronounced: 'I don't think it's there.'

'G-AVAL came into Hong Kong on 14 May 1973, operated by Libra,' Macy said. 'You mean it's still here?'

'I might have missed it,' the clerk said; 'but it could still be here—under repair, overhaul, something like that.'

'I never thought of that,' Macy mused. 'Where exactly would Libra do their repairs?'

'All the airlines have work done in either of two maintenance yards: Dasilva's, which is the biggest, or Taikoo.'

'I might take a look,' Macy said. There was a pleasing practicality about it. He wanted to do something. He hadn't known quite what the entries might have shown, hadn't expected anything in particular. It was simply the last, almost futile step he could take....

'You can see them from here,' the clerk said, beckoning him over to the window.

He pointed across the shimmering tarmac of the airport to the hangars on the other side. 'Both the yards are over there.'

The Scotsman in white overalls looked at him suspiciously. He tilted back his head and sighted Macy down his nose. He didn't know whether Macy was a representative of the insurance underwriters or not ... not very well-informed underwriters, if they couldn't find their planes.

'We have nae such plane here. I can tell y'. I'm knowing every piece of aircraft in all five acres of Dasilva's hangars.'

'Do you think you've had the plane here? Perhaps you

could tell me. And tell me to whom it was delivered.' Macy decided to push his credibility to the limit.

'You're a bonny gang o' underwriters, I must say, if y' canna find y' planes. I'd not be likin' to pay premiums to ye mysel'.'

'It's confusing I admit, but can you help me?'

The Scot looked fierce. 'I canna see it doin' harm,' he said, showing the brown teeth under his moustache in a grin. 'Mid May y' said. I'll look at ma records.'

The Scots engineer left him, and returned a few minutes later. 'I can tell ye categorically—no. We've never had that plane.'

Macy walked to the door of the administration building and stood on the step under the porch, blinking out into the brightness. Where to now? He could look into the cavernous depths of two of the hangars where repair crews worked and the air was full of kerosene-laden smoke.

'I'll be walking in the direction of Taikoo Maintenance. Which way is that?' Macy asked.

'Go out the main gate,' the Scot, who was at his shoulder said, 'and turn right. It's maybe a quarter-mile. On this side. Past the Libra Company's yard.'

'What did you say?' Macy asked, turning to the Scot.

Macy paused at the main gate and looked carefully about. Nobody seemed to be interested in him. The care he had taken to lose anyone who might have followed him had paid off—or Libra had given up. It was twelve noon. The sun was blistering down, destroying every shadow.

Perhaps the deal had been signed by now; perhaps Libra didn't care any more. But he was going to go on just that bit further. He looked up and down the road. Almost bare. An occasional lorry. This was an industrial area. Factories and storage yards lined the other side of the street in both directions.

Macy turned right and began to walk, keeping close to the high fence.

There were no pedestrians in sight. Nobody was mad enough to try to walk at this time of day. He could feel the moisture

running down his chest and two dark patches had appeared under the arms of his light grey suit.

He walked it seemed half a mile before he came to the Taikoo gate. Then he walked back, trying to calculate how much of the fence was theirs. It was corrugated iron, a dozen feet high, and topped with barbed wire.

He sweated back to a place he calculated was about halfway between Taikoo and Dasilva's. If this was the Libra yard, it didn't seem to have any gate. And no sign.

He crossed the road. From this distance he could see the top of a hangar. He was going to get in there. And he could see an irregularity in the line of barbed wire that he had missed as he walked along the fence line.

He re-crossed to where the irregularity in the barbed wire was; it was a gate all right, but sufficiently flush with the fence for him to have missed it in his hurry.

There was a gap of two or three inches between the gate and the gatepost on one side, enough to give a handhold or toehold, and a greater concentration of leaded nail heads every foot or so up the gatepost that might serve also as some kind of foot support.

Steve Macy looked up and down the street. There were a few distant figures, a few vehicles, but nothing to give concern. He slipped off his shoes and put one in each of the side pockets of his jacket.

He slid his hands into the crevice and locked them there, and with one foot gained a similar toehold. The other foot found enough support on the nail heads. And he began to climb, urging himself upward quickly. His hands and feet were rubbed and bruised in the crevice, but he soon reached the barbed wire and pulled himself to the top.

The barbed wire was more a psychological than a practical deterrent. He swung himself clear of it, and without waiting to survey the yard from his exposed position on the fence, dropped inside, with no more than skinned fingers and toes and a few small tears in his suit.

He put his shoes on, and looked about. It was a strange, deserted world of shining fuselages, all carrying the faded light-blue/dark-blue Libra colours.

It took a moment to appreciate that the fuselages were covered with dust; the reflection of the sun from them was golden and muted by a coating of dust.

Steve Macy moved forward slowly and curiously. As he looked more closely he could see corroded patches, hatches swinging open, cabin windows broken, wings dipped at sickly angles. Two of the aircraft were wingless, another lurched over on its broken undercarriage. A piece of canvas hung from a motor pod. A nose wheel was abandoned on the ground.

Macy took shelter under one of the hulls and felt in his pockets for the piece of paper listing the 'missing planes'. He'd left it at the hotel. But from where he crouched he could see three air registration signs that were familiar, and he memorized them. G-AFGE, G-ABSE and G-ATRE.

He didn't need to know anything about aircraft to realize that the value of those he was looking at was not much more than the value of the scrap metal and a few spare parts. G-AVAL, the 727, must be somewhere here.

He counted seven hulls in all in the yard, and found the 727 at the back of the hangar. She looked quite new in comparison to the others, but her wings had been removed, and the tail section with its three motors. He hoisted himself into the cabin. The seats were still intact, but dirty and torn. The instrument panel in the pilot's cabin was rusty.

Now to get inside the hangar. Seven planes outside. Another three at least, inside. He dropped to the ground from the hull of the 727 and tried the side door of the hangar. It swung open.

Coming in from the light to the shadow he was blind. He took in the vastness of the hangar, with more hulls on the far side, crammed in. In a few seconds he could make out benches, in the foreground, quite near him, loaded with old and partly stripped motors. He coughed. Everything was coated with thick, brown dust.

Then the dogs were on him. They came from the far side of the hangar, silently at first, with only the sound of their exertion as they launched themselves at him, brown-black, with the horrible pinkness of their open mouths.

Steve Macy swung round and ran back towards the door,

but it had lodged shut firmly and he could not wrench it open before he had to turn and face the dogs.

Two dogs, both big Chows with narrow, wolfish jaws and wide, small-eyed heads. They blocked him against the door, fanning out a little, and both bore in together without a pause.

Macy thrust the thickest part of his forearm into the jaws of one, and kicked wildly at the other. He felt teeth on the ankle of his left leg.

The top dog fell back from its leap, tearing away the arm of Macy's suit and shirt and only grazing his skin. The bottom dog was tussling with his left foot and ankle and hurting: he braced himself upright.

The dog that was looking for his throat came again, leaping high. Macy smashed a fist to its snout. The blow hurt Macy and the dog. The snout crunched. The dog retreated clumsily, yelping with pain as the blood flowed round its teeth.

Macy brought his free foot down twice on the neck of the leg dog which leaped back more from uncertainty about its companion than Macy's effectiveness.

The two dogs scurried about each other, panting, catching a breath while they regrouped, enraged, hunching their shoulders for a final attack.

Steve Macy noticed a piece of greasy wood on the floor near his feet; it was about two and a half feet long and thicker than he could comfortably wield with one hand, but he caught it up.

The dogs were quick to appreciate that their adversary was now armed. They instinctively came in together, wide and very low.

Macy was left handed and he selected the dog on his left and stepped out towards him, swinging the timber. He caught the animal a glancing blow on the shoulder, and turned immediately to the other.

Luck was with him. The club was naturally in such an arc of travel that he was able to get his other hand to it, and bring it squarely down on the skull of the second attacker. The dog's forefeet collapsed for an instant, and then it was able to stagger away, shaking its head stupidly.

The two Chows were disconcerted. Both were hurt. One's jaws were running with blood, and the other kept rolling its head like a punch-drunk boxer. They fell back even further this time, circling each other, groaning, planning a new assault.

Macy threw his weight against the door behind him. It yielded, and simultaneously the two Chows launched their third attack.

Macy extricated himself, his club, and slammed the door, but the bloody-mouthed dog was quicker than his companion and got through with grazed haunches.

Macy flung the piece of wood and it sent the dog yelping away. He ducked under a fuselage and ran for the back fence: he had no way of scaling the front.

The other dog was out, and they were both at his heels as he scurried from obstacle to obstacle, turning on them to throw a bolt or a bracket or a piece of wood when there was one to throw.

With the dogs tearing at his legs he swung himself up, again, to the cabin of the 727, and jumped from there to the top of the back fence which had a heavy wooden inner frame, well able to support him.

He looked down once more at the red jaws as they convulsed with barking, and swung himself over the barbed wire. He hung for a second from the wire and then dropped to the ground. Kai Tak airport.

Steve Macy collapsed in the shadow of the fence. He couldn't have run or walked another step. He dabbed at his bleeding hands with a handkerchief.

It was an agony to raise his ankle so he could examine the teeth marks, and staunch the flow of blood.

Planes blasted across the runway in front of him, riffling his hair with their kerosene-soaked wind.

He wiped his hands over his wet face, and then wiped them on what was left of his suit. He fished out a battered pack of cigarettes, and lit one.

He was sitting in one of the most God-awful places imaginable, and he was in very very bad shape, but that cigarette

was the greatest he ever smoked. He drew it down really deep. It was a real trip.

He'd caught them, the bastards. Ten planes worth fifty million, they said.

PART THREE

CLAW OF THE BEAR

The bull tosses his horns up; the bear claws down: these are the metaphors for a rising and a falling stock market

30

Macy lay on the dry grass against the fence. The elation of the find was followed by exhaustion, weakness in every limb.

The airfield shimmered in the heat. From the corner of his eye, somewhere in that blurred distance, Steve Macy became aware of sudden, urgent movements.

Men in white helmets and khaki denims were coming out of a gate in the fence two hundred yards away. They fanned out in a line. They were looking for him. They had seen him and their initially cautious movements gave way to a brisk, disciplined trot.

There was nobody else within sight; nothing except the field, the runways and the planes screaming off. He had to get to a telephone bloody quick, call Klein, Prescott, tell somebody what he'd found, tell before he was prevented from telling....

Steve Macy hauled himself to his feet, his body aching. He started to run along the fence-line in the opposite direction. The fence seemed to stretch to a hazy infinity without any gate or opening.

He glanced back over his shoulder. The guards—if that's what they were—were at least six in number, maintaining the same jog, confident that they were overhauling him, expressionless.

He pounded on, conscious now of the ball of fire in his chest as his lungs strained in the tepid air. He stumbled on the rough ground and his shoulder struck the fence. He ought not to hug the fence; he ought to be out in the field, out where the planes were; he'd be safer there; he might attract attention And he swerved off at right-angles to the fence.

The pursuers were disconcerted. Their line slowed and broke, until the boss gave orders which set them off, in a pack, in Macy's direction at increased speed.

The gap had narrowed to fifty yards. Macy made the first runway which was not in use and crossed it. He had two hundred yards to go to the next, the main one.

A VC10 lifted off in front of him and he could see the passengers through the cabin windows as she tilted upward and started to climb. He could hear someone behind him, the breath tearing in and out of the man's throat.

Macy kept it up, each leg sending an impact of pain through his body. Another man was behind him now, only a yard or two away ... a little yellow truck with a flashing light on top was coming in his direction, but so far away.... He waved.

A strangled demand for him to stop came from behind, but he only renewed his efforts. Then another pain superimposed on all the others as a hard object struck the back of his neck. The dried grass which poked wirily out of the hard-baked earth came up towards him. And darkness.

Shalimar IV stood off about a mile from the mouth of Repulse Bay in a flat calm.

Philip Challis in a comfortable deck-chair under the fore-deck awning thumbed through the sheaf of documents in his hand: they were the detailed contracts that established the Libra Consortium. And they were all signed.

He was perfectly satisfied. Dasilva's grandiose style of doing business didn't appeal to him; but it had been effective, he had to admit that. He disliked the harsh sun and the sea, and could see no virtue in mixing them up with business, which he enjoyed. But he was enjoying himself now, quite appreciating the grace of the yacht, the delicious bouquet of the champagne. It was not too hot.

The agreement they had all hammered out the night before had not only held together, but the remaining disputed points had been the subject of easy concessions from Prescott. Both Prescott and Klein had become more jovial, more agreeable in the relaxed atmosphere of the yacht. The deal was done.

Philip Challis did not feel like talking to the others. Prescott, Klein and West, not two yards away from him, were expounding their plans. He recalled that inside West's notecase was a draft for fifteen million United States dollars, to be paid by First Bankers as a first instalment of a line of credit which would eventually run into hundreds of millions of dollars—the initial trickle of a torrent.

Dasilva was playing the gentleman host, offering cigars, handsome, superior, smiling.

The only sour note was the fact that Harry hadn't arrived from Singapore.

'Can't understand why Beech couldn't get here,' Prescott said shaking his head in puzzlement.

'Maybe it ain't a big enough deal,' Klein said.

The others laughed.

'I don't think Libra's done anything quite as big as this before,' Challis said.

'Never,' West echoed. 'Harry organizes things and then we put it together, the details....'

'You're makin' me think I coulda left it to my assistant,' Prescott said.

'I know Harry intended to be here. He must have got held up. I can call the hotel now and find out if he's arrived,' Challis said, glad to have an excuse to leave them.

Challis stood up and began to make his way to the control room.

Evan Cooper also left the group and followed him. He turned and Cooper was very close by his shoulder, with long, hard, brown legs in white shorts, and a shirt open at the throat to reveal part of a broad chest. The cornflower-blue eyes with their fair long lashes always unnerved him.

'You're bored?' he said softly.

'Dear Phil,' Cooper replied. 'Always so sensitive to my moods.'

Challis felt Cooper's hand touch his buttock as they moved along the companionway. 'Why shouldn't I be?' he said.

He'd first met Cooper on a business trip to Hong Kong. Cooper was just one bright young executive amongst a number, but he was the only one of the crowd left with Challis in the Penthouse Bar of the Mandarin that night....

Philip Challis couldn't remember whether he'd even noticed Evan Cooper especially, before the two of them were alone in the bar. Challis was amused at first, and entertained, by the charming and handsome young man who simply wouldn't stop talking and apparently didn't want to go home.

He remembered how the fatigue of the long flight wore

off as he and the young man consumed more and more gin and tonic. He remembered the intelligent and alarming cornflower-blue eyes....

He'd thought he might take a walk that night before bed, along the waterfront, where the junks were moored; and then he was glad of the security of that glass cage he was sharing with the young man. The vast city and the harbour below him were forgotten for the fair-lashed eyes. The last thing he wanted to do was take a walk.

'Let's go up to my flat,' Cooper said. 'The view's far better than this, and I have more gin, and some nice records....'

And so they went, lolling stupidly together in the taxi, giggling like a couple of kids.

The apartment, it was true, had a breathtaking view from high above the city. In the silver light of evening it made Challis feel big, and it was the most natural thing in the world for him to stand on the balcony, close to Cooper, and feel the hard thigh and arm pressing against him.

He'd sat down on a soft, wide couch with another gin and tonic—how many was that?—and flaked out.

The awakening he would remember all his life. Every detail.

The smell was the first thing he recalled. The mild smell of bath salts He was naked. And smooth. Clean. In bed, in the dry warmth of the bedroom, with only a sheet over him.

The milky reflection of the ceiling suggested dawn.

There was a body beside him, warm and awake, and a hand crept excitingly between his thighs.

Where were his own hands? Evan Cooper's lips were searing his cheek. He turned to the lips, to the eyes, his hand sought....

And they burned together as fiercely as twin cannibals in bedlam.

Challis swayed in the centre of the control room, and it was a moment or two before he realized the operator was taking a message on the radio telephone.

The operator wrote a name on a pad. 'Alvarez ... I understand.'

'Who's calling?' Challis asked.

'Mr Alvarez asking for Mr Cooper.'

'Go on, Evan, answer it. What does he want?' Challis said.

Evan Cooper took the phone. He'd gained in assurance since Challis had had him promoted. The promotion was no gift. Cooper was a very good executive.

But Cooper was too young to hide the tension in his face as he hung up the telephone.

'What's wrong?' Challis asked.

'Somebody's broken into the Libra yard. Seen the planes. Tried to get away.'

'Who is it?' Challis asked.

'Alvarez isn't sure.'

'It must be that snooper Macy. Must be.' Challis bit his lip. 'The man Richard regarded as virtually useless!'

'The security guards have him at the yard.'

'You better get there right away. You'll have to ... use your own discretion about what to do....'

'What are you going to tell West?' Cooper asked.

'For the moment, nothing. He needs an untroubled mind to go on talking to Prescott and company. I'll tell him later,' Challis said.

'If this gets out ...' Cooper said.

'It can't. It simply can't, Evan,' Challis said, seeing apprehension cloud Cooper's blue eyes.

'I'll have to leave it to Alvarez to——'

'Perhaps the man will accept a contract of employment with us at a good figure ... I don't know.'

Evan Cooper drew a deep breath. His resolution came back. There was a lot at stake.

'I'll take the speedboat,' he said, leaving the cabin.

31

Macy came to, after an age of nightmares and dreams. But not much time had gone by, he guessed. The guards were mostly gone. Only two remained, across the far side of the room. The room. Where was it?

A dingy office. Dusty. He was slumped on a packing case

against the wall. Unused. Was it in the hangar, or attached to the hangar?

He put his hand up to his wet forehead. His sleeve was torn. His suit was in tatters. But the back of his neck, and his shoulder ... he eased them; they were rigid, paralysed, past mere hurt.

He felt sick in his stomach. Had they broken something? The dogs. No sign of them. A man he hadn't noticed before. Not one of the Chinese security guards. A swarthy Portuguese with a thick black moustache. Watching him.

The Portuguese had a pleasant smile. 'So you're awake?'

Macy couldn't raise the strength to move his facial muscles, let alone smile.

'What do you think you're doing on private property, Mr Macy?'

Macy didn't feel like trying his vocal cords at the moment.

The Portuguese, still amused, picked up Macy's pocket book from the bench beside him and thumbed through it a second time for Macy's benefit: the wad of notes, credit card, driving licence and a couple of old laundry tickets. 'I have to find out about you, see?'

The Portuguese replaced the papers, and all the money, and threw the pocket book back on the bench. 'I'm not going to rob you, don't worry,' he said. 'But you'd better start talking.'

The Portuguese was in no hurry. He began to roll a cigarette, deftly moulding the tobacco in one palm, and placing it on a paper which he curled into a perfect cylinder with the fingers of his other hand.

Macy took the opportunity to try to see what was beyond the windows. Sky. No buildings, at least within his limited vision. So they were behind or beside the hangar, but not within it. The door was at the end of the room, ajar. The door seemed to lead to the hangar, to the dogs, the fences ... it was impossible. But there was another door, in the side-wall: closed.

He was not tied. But what did it matter? He was so battered, he could hardly put one foot in front of the other.

The Portuguese drew on his weed with enjoyment. 'You are a silent man, Mr Macy.'

Macy ignored him. He listened. The roar of aero engines. Yes, they were in or near the yard.

'I think we'll have to hand you over to the police for breaking and entering private premises,' the Portuguese said.

'Do that.'

The Portuguese smirked sarcastically. The two security guards were in a huddle of private conversation. The resolution came to Macy instantaneously.

He launched the full weight of his body off the packing case, at the oily face.

His fist had crunched the nose-bone almost before the expression had time to change to surprise and pain.

A chop to the Portuguese's throat, and he turned to jerk open the side door. He was outside before the two dazed guards had fully risen to their feet.

He was confronted by a narrow passage between two buildings, blocked in one direction by two more guards. He fled in the other.

He ran along the passage, into a building, across a wide garage, out a door and along another path, then into another building, through doors and halls and passages, taking the way of least resistance each time, turning in another direction when he saw somebody, winding and twisting in the maze, until suddenly, in a hall of doorways he stopped. He listened through the hoarse sound of his own breath: he could hear no pursuit.

He went to the end of the hall and looked out. The road. Not the one that flanked the hangar, but another, busier road. He warmed at the sight of so many cars and buses.

Macy tried a door, then another, and by good luck soon found the stairs to the street door. In minutes he was inside a taxi, heading towards the Star Ferry, with no pursuer in sight.

32

When Richard West returned from seeing Prescott, Klein, Ullman and all the big boys in the First Bankers team off at

Kai Tak airport, he found a note from Challis asking him to go to Challis's suite.

He showered and changed his clothes from the white slacks and sports shirt he'd worn on the Shalimar that afternoon, to a light linen suit. Prescott had been anxious to return to other business in New York. And now West's job was done.

Before he went upstairs, West couldn't resist sitting down at the desk in his room and jotting down a few figures on a piece of Mandarin notepaper:

	dollars
Additional allotment of Libra shares:	100,000
Profit on 250,000 Oriental Freight:	700,000
Allotment of Consortia shares 500,000:	1,125,000
Total:	2,000,000

It wasn't quite a total of two million dollars, but the figure was irresistible, and in a few months, all going well, the Consortia shares would have appreciated enough to close the gap.

Richard West was particularly buoyant as he ran up the flight of stairs. It was, he decided, a very special pleasure to be rich. To have the huge salary of an international businessman, as he did, with almost unlimited expenses was one thing. It was a lot, but not enough. There was always the feeling that one was dependent on the job, dependent on the company, on the goodwill of the other directors....

Now he was, quite simply, rich. And independent. No wonder the stairs gave him no trouble.

The door of Challis's suite was open and he went in.

He heard voices from the open door of the bedroom.

'... out cold....' one voice said.

'He's too late ... Prescott's gone,' another said.

West recognized Challis's voice.

'I'll see you in London soon, Evan,' Challis said.

'Don't go on about that,' Cooper sighed. 'What's going to happen when this guy gets to ...'

The voice tailed off. They were aware of him. Challis thrust his head round the bedroom door suspiciously.

'Who's too late?' West said, taking the offensive.

He put his hands in his pockets and walked casually into the bedroom.

Challis pressed his lips together for control. 'Still listening at doors, Richard?'

'I overheard. I don't need excuses. Who's too late? Who are you talking about?'

Richard West pressed them aggressively because it sounded like business. His business. And because both were disconcerted.

Cooper's usually perfect golden waves of hair were tangled over his forehead. His jacket was baggy and creased.

Challis was merely annoyed and nervous, but he recovered quickly.

'I thought you gave this up when they promoted you from office-boy,' he said.

'What's going on?'

'My private—affair—with Philip,' Cooper said.

Cooper got the word 'affair' out with difficulty. It was almost convincing.

Challis, not one who bothered with self-justification, changed the subject haughtily: 'Have they gone?'

'I held Prescott's hand right to his seat in the VIP cabin.'

'Good. You may need to hold it again in future,' Challis said.

'I think we have Prescott's confidence.'

'We have a certain amount of his money, which is more important,' Cooper said.

'You did a superb job of negotiation.'

West noticed that Challis's suitcase was open on the bed, half packed.

'Are you going?' he asked.

Challis was methodically examining each drawer of the dresser, removing its contents. 'Yes, Richard. I've decided to get an early plane—in about an hour.'

'What's the hurry?'

'I have an appointment in London—on another matter.'

Richard West didn't particularly want his company, but he said: 'You ought to stay over and celebrate....'

'Perhaps you'd like to take Evan out to dinner,' Challis said acidly.

West was silent. Both of them gave him the creeps.

'I'll see you in London,' he said, going to the door.

'Enjoy your Eastern tart,' Challis said, snapping his suitcase shut.

Richard West whistled as he walked down the corridor. That was exactly what he intended to do.

Steve Macy crossed in the ferry from Kowloon and jumped the taxi queue at the Star Ferry terminal.

Once safe in his room at the Hilton, he went for the phone.

'I want to call Mr Prescott at the Mandarin Hotel.'

'I'll get him right away,' the girl replied automatically.

But he had to ring her back. 'Can't you get the Mandarin?'

'Sure, but they're looking for Mr Prescott,' the girl said pertly.

He fixed himself a large slug from the flask of Scotch. Half a cigarette later the phone buzzed.

'I'm sorry. Mr Prescott has left town.'

'When?'

He waited an age on the line.

'Just a little while ago. Half an hour, maybe,' the operator said.

'Okay. I want to call Mr Prescott in New York at 654 34 43 56.'

'He won't be there yet, will he?' the operator asked.

'Good thinking. Put the call through like that please. Then I can speak to Mr Prescott's secretary, or his assistant. I have an important message, you see——'

'I'll call you back,' the girl said flatly and went off the line.

Macy went into the bathroom and surveyed the damage in the mirror: his face was scratched and caked with grime, his hands were raw and bleeding, his suit and shirtsleeves torn. He began to examine the gashes from the dogs on his legs....

The phone hadn't rung.

He went back and picked up the receiver. 'What's happening with that call of mine to New York?'

'The international operators are busy, sir. I'll call you when I can.'

Macy heard a noise in the passage outside his room. Probably a couple of hotel guests strolling along.

But he went to the door. It was solid. He turned the key. He slid the balcony windows closed. They were of thick sheets of glass, strong enough to withstand typhoon winds.

Macy adjusted the shower and threw his clothes on the floor. That call was taking an age....

He went to the phone again: 'I want to send a cable——'

'You want to cancel the long distance, sir?'

'No. I want to send this cable as well.'

'I'll take it down.'

'It's to: *Orville Prescott Bantrust New York. Discovered fraud in connection with 50 million dollars worth of planes today. Stop deal. Details follow. Macy.*'

'I'll see that's sent, sir.'

'Right away, please.'

He finished off the slug of whisky and then took a good pull from the flask to help it down. Was she going to send the cable? Maybe the Libra people had got to her? Funny she didn't get the New York number ... or was he being a nervous fool?

He showered quickly. His body cried out to be soaked for hours, and he denied it. Libra wouldn't want any messy confrontations with him. But they would want to cut off communication.

If he got the cable away, or if he could get somebody big enough on the end of the line in New York, Libra were dead.

So they couldn't let him communicate; and he had to have an accident as soon as possible.

Christ! Here he was in the Hilton Hotel in Hong Kong and he didn't even dare to ring for a drink. He smoked a cigarette.

He watched the telephone but it showed no sign of life. A different approach was necessary.

'Get me the police.'

'Certainly, sir, any particular branch?' the girl retorted, deadpan.

'Inspector Kevin Ryan, Kowloon Central.'

He waited five minutes.

'Any progress on that call?'

'Which one, sir?'

'To the police.'

'I'm having trouble with the connection.'

'You're the most unhelpful girl I ever never met.'

'I beg your pardon, sir?'

Macy dropped the instrument on to the low table. He could hear the girl's continued calm inquiries from a distance.

He patted his pockets. In them he had money, passport, cigarettes, matches. His one other suit, brown, unpressed and too heavy for the climate, was on his back. His white shirt was open. He stuffed a tie into his jacket pocket.

Steve Macy pulled back the doors of the wardrobe. His sweater, shirts, underclothes. They would have to stay. He plucked a pair of silver cuff-links off the shelf. Worth taking. One of Linda's presents.

He could hear what he thought was breathing or at least a tense presence as he put his ear to the door.

He tiptoed across the carpet, unlatched the balcony doors, and slipped outside. His belly tightened as he looked down twenty floors to the green of the Hong Kong Cricket Club's grounds.

It wasn't that far to the next balcony; it was a jump you'd make without too much strain, if there wasn't a twenty-floor fall hanging on it. He funked it. He couldn't do it. Instead, he went back into the room and then rushed out of the door, and down the main stairs. He didn't look behind. He ran. He ran along Queen's Road Central, down de Voeux Road, into the thickening crowd.

The harbour was a block away. He had to cross. He could go to the Kowloon Station and see Ryan, or he could head for Kai Tak and hope to get a plane. The ferry was too crowded and there were too many delays getting on and off when he might be vulnerable....

A water taxi was the thing. He kept dodging through the

crowd, always looking over his shoulder, at times willing himself to think that there was nobody following. He was just being neurotic. He'd given them the slip.

But if he was wrong, and he was being followed, he would have that accident....

Steve Macy cut through an alley from the roadway to the waterfront. He crossed the road to the path by the sea wall. Lines of moored junks, roped together, were loading and unloading their cargoes. Flimsy wooden walkways threaded deviously between the moored boats and bore the laborious steps of the coolies carrying their loaded panniers.

Fifty yards away was a more substantial landing stage with half a dozen very narrow craft each about fifteen feet long, tossing at their moorings. The water taxis: with small inboard motors, a rough canvas awning to protect against the spray, and perilously little freeboard.

The skipper of the nearest taxi responded to Macy's apparent hurry with unflappable briskness. Without a word he had cast off, opened up the ticking motor, and was weaving out between the other boats.

Macy pointed to a landing place on the Kowloon side a quarter of a mile from the ferry terminal. The skipper changed course in acknowledgment. He might get the skipper to change course again, at the last moment. That would take care of the possibility that he was being watched while he was on the water.

There was a fair chop in the harbour. Sheets of spray came across the craft and Macy had to duck under the canvas awning.

It was the long dusk of late spring. The huge buildings of Kowloon and the island were muffled in the golden glow of the low sun. The fiesta of neon signs on both sides of the harbour glared through the soft light promising pearls, gin, holidays, watches, everything.

Steve Macy took a firm hold as the little boat plunged and rose. He breathed the fragrant air, the spices, incense, salt spray, floating vegetables and diesel oil. He had only to get to a post office and cable Prescott and his work was essentially finished.

Prescott and Klein would send a team of their top executives to investigate. There would be questions Libra couldn't answer ... and then? He'd missed Prescott by a half-hour if the girl he spoke to on the telephone was telling the truth. How much had that half-hour cost First Bankers? They'd closed the deal. Paid their money. They'd never see it again. Prescott would go mad. He smiled to himself. It was rather nice, the prospect of Prescott finding out he'd made a big boo-boo.

What seemed more important than anything else was to follow it through to the end. And to see Linda; to see her just once more before he went back to New York. To talk things over.

Linda haunted him. That was the word, haunted. She always had.

So London had two attractions: Linda and Libra. He estimated the value of the wad of notes in his breast pocket. And there was the money he'd left in the locker at Heathrow.

Steve Macy's dreams were shattered by a huge dark presence which, in the fading light and in the second that he had available to judge, might have been another boat or a whale. As Macy turned to the stern at the strangled cry of the boatman, it rose out of the water and towered over them.

And then in an explosion of noise and water the apparition had passed, leaving the water taxi wallowing, shipping gallons of sea over its meagre freeboard.

Steve Macy clung on to the frame of the awning, ankle-deep in water. They were in real trouble. Halfway across the harbour in a bad light, in a tub which was about as seaworthy as a cigar box. Macy knew it was no accident.

The attacker was a big speedboat, black-hulled and twenty feet long. She was all business: the engines occupied four-fifths of her length behind the two-seater cockpit. Her bow was high and she looked solid enough to go over the top of them without a qualm.

The speedboat turned sharply back towards them. She didn't so much roar as set up a resonance of power in the air. The old Chinese boatman was so terrified he could hardly hold the tiller.

'Hey. Stand up. Go fast. Wind up. Like this,' Macy shouted at the boatman, rotating his hand to get the man to increase the throttle.

It was all they could do. He knew it wouldn't be enough. The old motor juddered hopelessly as it was over-revved. The taxi began to plunge on its way again.

The black boat came past again, close, but not so close that there was any danger of ramming, spurting its bow wave into the taxi. The tactic was to attack from behind. Macy watched helplessly. Other junks and water taxis had become distant blurs.

The black boat could be sure of getting alongside with as little opportunity for the water taxi to manoeuvre, if it came in from behind. The boatman shouted and gesticulated this time as the speedboat grated their side at speed, so that when it pulled away, the water taxi seemed to fall, sideways, into a deep trough.

Macy had a glimpse of the cockpit, with one man in it, dark, with a naval cap and goggles.

There was too much water pouring in now for the craft to right itself. The old motor coughed out. The boatman was pitched over the side with an impotent scream. Steve Macy's foothold became weaker under his feet. The sea was round his chest, and surprisingly cold. The bow pushed itself up from the waves, and then with a gurgle, the boat disappeared.

But the black speedboat had not done yet. Macy saw it dimly ahead of him and forced himself down into the frightening darkness of the waves, kicking off his shoes and wrestling out of his jacket. The boat went over him in a phosphorescent flash.

He struggled to the surface and waited for the speedboat to come again. And it did.

He went down and thought he would never come up, or would only come up when the speedboat was on top of him. He avoided the boat again and again, until he had lost count of how many times.

The speedboat was black. The sea was black. The sky had turned black. He vomited black water from his lungs. The neon lights which had promised so much were mere red and

blue and green pin-pricks getting smaller and smaller in the blackness....

33

London

The Jumbo Jet trembled slightly in the fresh morning sky, disturbed by a wind current. The passengers stirred and then relaxed again ... West's wristwatch, wound ahead to London time, read 7.30 a.m.

A man was finishing off his breakfast of bacon and eggs in a terraced house in the London suburb of Acton.

At Luton airport Libra mechanics were laying down their spanners, and wiping greasy hands with cotton waste after night-duty servicing.

The man left home and walked down the narrow street of terraced houses with a packet of sandwiches in his briefcase.

Labourers at the airport were hauling up the steel shutters of the loading bays; tractors were being hitched to trailers loaded with baggage and freight. The control tower flashed its angular windows in the sun across the other side of the field. The morning shift of air traffic controllers were checking the schedule of early arrivals. Flight 740 from Hong Kong, due at 7.45 a.m., was discernible in the distance. You could see the black smudge of unburnt fuel against the eggshell-blue sky.

The man bought a copy of *The Times* outside the tube station and caught the train to Piccadilly It was only a short, brisk walk down Lower Regent Street to the Libra Building.

At Luton, the Jumbo had nuzzled into the arm of the terminal. The night-duty men were going home: the mechanics, boilermen, wireless operators, welders, telephonists, tarmac-hands and watchmen. The newly arrived passengers, yawning and confused, were herded into the care of fresh hostesses, customs men and baggage-handlers.

The man joined the stream of people who passed Ernie Tidy's small table in the entrance hall and disappeared into

the lifts. On the tenth floor, the man entered a door marked 'Technical Drawing and Design Office'. It was a big, open room, with dozens of drawing boards and high swivel chairs. The man nodded a friendly greeting to the two or three workmates who had arrived before him.

A Libra hotel in California was opening its nightclub. Another, in Sicily, was preparing breakfast. The cranes at Libra's Rotterdam container-base were moving against a leaden sky. A loaded barge, covered by a tarpaulin stamped with the emblem of the scales of Justice, the emblem of the Libra organization throughout the world, was being hitched to a tug on Lake Huron.

George Bennett settled himself on the swivel seat behind the drawing board he had occupied for ten years in the same corner of the office.

A driver was thundering down Route 18 to Milan in one of Libra's loaded highway juggernauts. A ground crew at Brisbane, Australia, were able to read the name 'Zodiac Adventurer' on the light- and dark-blue nose of a newly arrived Boeing 727. Waste-paper baskets were empty and desks in Paris, Munich and Dallas were dusted and ready for their occupants. A tired master-printer in Boston adjusted the presses that spewed out copies of investment brochures for the latest money-making opportunity: 'Fund Libra'.

Bennett's pencil shaded in the elevated drawing of a special bolt which would become a tiny part of a giant engine that never stopped running.

34

Libra was not only men and women and machinery and buildings, it was money. Libra was dollars or francs or marks or pounds or pesetas; it was a figure on a board in the stock exchanges of London and New York, a percentage of return on capital, an earnings multiple, a number that rose when people jostled to buy and fell when they walked away, a number that might make you rich.

Nobody just walked into Everard Harwood's office without

any preliminaries, and therefore he was quite sure of remaining undisturbed while he made use of the cubicle behind his desk.

Outwardly the cubicle was a tall, inlaid walnut cabinet. The door swung open to reveal a full-length mirror, a tiny washhand basin with a towel and a variety of lotions and soaps and combs.

It reassured him to see himself full length: a neat figure with only the slightest thickening at the waist—excusable in a man of fifty. And the exquisite suit of chalk-striped worsted—marvellous that the fall of the fashionably wide lapels didn't add bulkiness. One couldn't go all the way with fashion however, and the black-and-white silk tie was tightly knotted round a decent, stiff white collar.

Everard Harwood's finger smoothed that greyish area under each eye. The face wasn't puffy, but tanned a good, natural colour. He wasn't going to be one of those out-of condition fellows with a complexion like a fire engine.

All in all it was comforting to see such a well set up man, a man of respectability and good taste, one who was a figure in the City. Everard Harwood dabbed some cologne on his handkerchief and applied it to his temples.

His thoughts were interrupted by the muffled buzz of the speaker on his desk. He leaned over and touched a button.

'Mr Challis calling again,' his secretary said.

'Tell him I'm in a meeting,' Harwood said, and returned to the mirror.

A final smoothing of the thin grey hair and he was whole and in possession of himself. A slight smile of recognition, but not too much, because there was no point in adding unnecessarily to the wrinkles round his eyes, and the senior partner in Bender, Harwood & Co. was ready for business. The business of stockbroking.

Harwood touched the speaker again. 'You can get Challis.'

And what did Mr Philip Challis of the Challis Merchant Bank want? It was rather flattering to be called by Challis, and it only confirmed his standing in the City. The name Challis was not, of course, on a par with Rothschild, but it was old, solid and respected. Challis only dealt with the best

people and Bender, Harwood had been favoured in that respect for more than a year.

Philip Challis was on the line.

'Ah, Philip, I'm so sorry I was tied up when you rang earlier. How are you? Good. I've read of the new Libra merger. Most imaginative. Most interesting....'

'It's about Libra that I wanted to speak, Everard.'

'Very keen interest in the market. Very keen.'

'I want to ask a personal favour,' Challis said.

'Anything at all. Anything,' Harwood retorted.

'I have a large block of shares in Libra in my name as trustee. The beneficiary is hard up, and wants to realize.'

'Of course. Of course. But why not borrow against them? I don't need to tell you this is no time to be selling. No time at all. Borrow on the security. Borrow.'

'I can't do that, Everard. As trustee I have to quit them,' Challis said.

'You can't take them yourself?'

'I don't think I should. And I'm fairly well committed myself at the moment,' Challis said. 'You see, there's a million ordinaries.'

Everard Harwood's eyebrows arched but his voice remained unchanged. 'Let me see. At the last price....' His memory was excellent: 'Near enough to fifteen million pounds. Difficult to place without a sag in the market.'

'You can understand I don't want that. As I say, I'm a trustee. My own holdings are intact. I have every confidence in Libra,' Challis said.

'Of course. Of course. Mmmm,' Harwood tailed off.

'You can do it, Everard?'

'Certainly. Certainly. Rising market. Plenty of interest and confidence in Libra. Good profit forecast. Mmmm.'

'Do you think you can place them in a week?'

'A week? Not without causing a thumping sag in the market,' Harwood said. 'What price do you want?'

'The best you can get.'

'Bottom limit?'

'None,' Challis said. 'Best price.'

When he hung up the phone, Harwood was tempted to

open the closet and look in the mirror. The same man confronted him with a slightly more serious air. It didn't matter very much whether Challis was telling him the truth or not: the problem was the same. Get rid of fifteen million pounds' worth of shares without upsetting the market. For Bender, Harwood & Co. there was much profit in such problems.

He cleaned his fingernails with a manicure instrument before closing the cubicle. Libra were great performers. Harry Beech was such a go-ahead character. But he preferred a less colourful management—from the point of view of inspiring confidence.

Harwood pressed the intercom button. One had, nevertheless, to remember that the Harry Beeches of today were the Lord Mayors of London of tomorrow.

'Ask Robert Forrest to come in,' he said.

It always gave Everard Harwood pleasure to recall that the shrewd-looking, handsome and stylishly dressed assistant who advanced towards him across the carpet was, in a way, his own creation.

Forrest had joined Bender, Harwood as a messenger at sixteen. He might have remained one if Everard Harwood had not exploited, almost as an experiment, the boy's high intelligence and astonishing gift of mimicry. In manner and appearance and tone of voice, Robert Forrest was indistinguishable from the wealthy young men who plentifully filled the staff of assistants, seeking to become members of the stock exchange and partners in broking firms.

In ability, Forrest exceeded most of his more privileged counterparts. Under his show of ease, well hidden, was a driving determination. That was precisely why Everard Harwood had created him.

'Robert, I have an interesting assignment for you,' Harwood began: 'Libra.'

'Shouldn't be a problem. Ordinaries? How many?'

'Yes,' Harwood said, pausing. '250,000.'

Forrest whistled. 'That's over three million pounds.'

'Do you think you can handle it without upsetting the market?'

'Sure. I think Global Mutual might be interested in a

large block. Maybe we could place most of them privately.'

'Go and try,' Harwood said.

When Robert Forrest had left the room, Harwood scribbled on his pad '750,000'. That was the number of shares he had to work on. The market might depend on confidence, but it also depended on discretion. One could not even tell one's employees everything.

35

New York

'I'm dead,' Orville Prescott said.

He balanced himself on his toes for a second, hands clasped behind his back, as he looked out of the window. The view from Herbert Klein's office on the eighteenth floor of Century Building was ever changing, yet the same: the coloured dots of people and cars on Park Avenue.

The same as when he stood in this exact spot and agreed to engage Steve Macy.

Herbert Klein was in his usual position: lying back in the swivel chair behind his desk, his feet crossed on top of the desk.

'I dunno, Orville ...' Klein began, frowning at the Rothko on the wall, and letting the piece of paper in his hand skim across the desk and settle on the far edge.

'I'm as dead as a Dodo bird,' Prescott said, turning away from the window and picking up the piece of paper. 'Ullman and his gang will have me out of the presidency so quick it won't be funny.'

'You have enough stock to assure your place on the board,' Klein said.

'You think I want to sit by and rubber-stamp the decisions of another man in the job I've been doing for thirty years?'

Prescott flapped the paper: 'This may be a load of baloney ... but I don't think so.' He read it again.

FOR ORVILLE PRESCOTT BANTRUST NEW YORK.

INVESTIGATION REVEALS THAT TEN PLANES SHOWN
ON THE SCHEDULE OF ASSETS AS BEING WORTH $50M
ARE IN A JUNK YARD NEAR KAI TAK AIRPORT WORTH
THE PRICE OF SCRAP STOP SITE IS SITUATED ON THE AIRPORT
SIDE OF EASTFIELD ROAD ABOUT A HALF MILE NORTH OF
THE INTERSECTION WITH FERRY STREET STOP
PLEASE WIRE FUNDS TO KOWLOON CENTRAL POST OFFICE STOP
PREVIOUS FUNDS LOST IN HARBOUR ACCIDENT FOLLOWING
DISCOVERY WHICH DELAYED THIS CABLE STOP SUGGEST
I PROCEED TO LONDON AND CONTINUE INVESTIGATION STOP
MACY

'I told you he was a good man,' Klein said.

'Damn it, Herb, you agreed with me he wasn't doing any good, behaving as though he was in a gangster movie, mucking round with West's wife....'

'Sure I did, Orville. I only meant that basically I knew he was an able guy, and I only wish I had had more confidence in him. But wait till we check this cable out.'

'I thought he was some kind of nut,' Prescott said. 'All that about getting hit on the head. I still think so!'

'Yeah. I wonder what he means about a harbour accident,' Klein said.

'Macy might be right,' Prescott said sceptically, 'that Libra use strong-arm tactics when necessary. Anybody who can pull this one about the planes can do anything.'

'What we have to work out,' Klein said, 'is how we're going to break the news to the Board—if Steve's right.'

'We've been working on this deal for months,' Prescott said, his voice rising to a righteous wail; 'why the hell do we ever bother to employ accountants and auditors and lawyers? Why didn't they check this out?'

'It beats me how Libra could pass off a lot of junk as planes worth fifty million,' Klein said.

'Damn fraudulent bastards!' Prescott said. 'Libra's in breach of every term of our deal, every condition, I'll call it off, I'll sue——' Prescott stopped. 'I've sent a whole team of guys out to Hong Kong to crawl over every inch of that damn site, Herb!'

'Now calm down, Orville, and let's work out——'

'Calm down, when I've just paid out fifteen million to a gang of crooks?' Prescott rasped. And then changed his tone: 'Maybe it *is* all baloney. Maybe this guy Macy *is* a nut....'

36

London

Robert Forrest arranged to meet John Sturdy for lunch at the Carpenter's Arms. It was a pub where you could get one of the booths at the back and talk.

Forrest looked at his companion over a pint of bitter and a cheese roll.

'What's eating you, Bob?' Sturdy began, sucking confidently at his pint. He too was a broker's man.

'Nothing at all. Why should it be? Can't I suggest we have lunch without an ulterior motive?'

'You can, my friend, you can,' Sturdy said, setting down the pint and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. 'But it's how you ask and when you ask. All your arrangements are a last minute yawn, but this morning I get a call at eleven from a rather tense, excited Robert Forrest——'

'Tense and excited my balls!' Forrest retorted, pushing his half-eaten roll away in irritation.

'And so I know you have some news, and I know it's good news. Now tell me,' Sturdy said, sitting back in satisfaction.

It was bloody annoying that Sturdy was right, but Forrest's natural good humour asserted itself. 'I must be as transparent as glass,' he smiled.

'Oh, I don't know,' Sturdy said loftily. 'Some people are exceptionally perceptive.'

'I'll chuck this beer at you if you don't stop being so bloody smug.'

'Start talking,' Sturdy laughed.

'I think we can make some money.'

'Nice. Tell me.'

'I can get hold of a large block of shares at a good price

and we—I say we because I'm hoping you'll come in with me—and we can drop them before settlement. We may only need to hold them a couple of days,' Forrest said.

'What are they?' Sturdy inquired doubtfully.

'Libra.'

'Ah. Yes. Been doing things in Hong Kong.'

'Right,' Forrest said. 'This consortium deal is financed by First Bankers Trust in New York. It's not simply a takeover. Libra shares are going to go up in the next few days as more comes through about the deal.'

'Might go down,' Sturdy said glumly.

'No chance,' Forrest said. 'The deal is quite revolutionary as far as transport in the Pacific is concerned. The consortium aim to monopolize it. You wait till all this comes out. It'll arouse a lot of interest.'

Sturdy gave a cautious nod of agreement. 'It's possible. Libra have dropped a little over the past few months, haven't they?'

'They're about set to recover now.'

Sturdy got up and went to the bar.

Bob Forrest watched the barmaid's tits jiggling under her blouse. Good pub this. Dark, smoky, private. And the barmaid was worth watching, too, if you had nothing better to think of. If he pulled this job off, he could have any amount like her.

All you had to do was to make one good killing to give yourself the capital. Then you could risk your own capital. Until then, you had to risk somebody else's. There was no point in sitting alongside people making fortunes, helping them seeing the bargains go past: you have to do it yourself, trust your own judgment, take a calculated risk.

Forrest's attention had strayed from the pair of breasts. He was looking at the wall of the empty booth in front of him. Any man that wasn't prepared to back his own financial judgment didn't deserve to make a penny and never would. If he succeeded, he'd think of things like that.

Sturdy came back bearing two glasses of whisky.

'Hey,' Forrest said, 'I've got to go back to the office and work this afternoon.'

'This is a special toast.'

'Toast?' Forrest inquired, looking up at the enthusiastic Sturdy.

'To the first venture of the Forrest–Sturdy Syndicate,' Sturdy said, handing him a glass.

'This place is like a –' He hesitated and then decided to let his tongue go—'a very expensive whorehouse.'

'You would certainly know that,' Deirdre West said to her husband.

The bedroom choked him. It was huge, and yet it choked him. The walls disappeared in a distant white woolliness. The whitish curtains muffled the windows along one wall. The bed floated on a carpet of white lambswool.

The only relief were the tiny dots of lustre from the handles on the discreet dressers and wardrobes that were built into the walls: they were real gold.

Richard West expected the retort from his wife. It was worth enduring to be able to call the room a whorehouse.

'Whoring is something you know about,' he remarked dryly.

'We're going into all that are we? Yes, we are, for the nth time. I can feel it coming.'

'I don't want to go into anything.'

She was lying naked on the bed on her belly. Her body had a golden tan unbroken by any bikini marks.

'Where shall we start?' she asked, ignoring him. 'Let's start at the top——'

'You've been drinking.'

'One gin before dinner. Let's start with Harry.'

'So Harry's "the top" is he? Interesting, from the Benenden-educated daughter of a titled family.'

'Harry's king of your little world, Richard. Absolute monarch.'

'Perhaps. He's also an upstart kike who used to sell fake hair restorer in a circus.'

She smiled languidly. 'That won't do, Richard. Oh, I know how you feel about him, but you can't reduce his size by abusing him. He's a cultured, creative man——'

Richard West sat up straight on the bed and ran his palm

down his bare thigh. 'Harry Beech is a pushy little kike who would lie his head off to make a dollar.'

'You're jealous.'

'King!' Richard West snorted. 'Then he'll end on the block!'

'Better watch out he doesn't take you with him.'

'And you had to get laid by him.'

'I did and I'm glad I did. He's a man. A rare man.'

'You were just another notch in his belt. He soon got tired of you. I must say I sympathize with him.'

'Three or four months,' she muttered, more to the room than him. 'Three or four months it lasted. He did get tired of me. That was hard to take. But while it lasted, it was good.'

'You think with your fanny.'

'It was more than that,' she said unemphatically.

He knew it was more than that. And it hurt.

He reached across and put his hand on her bottom. 'Look, I'm sorry.'

She closed her eyes. 'Forget it. It doesn't matter. It's all over.'

She opened her legs to admit his fingers.

Her excitement rose quickly under his fingers. His was slower. He shut out Harry Beech. He shut out the stifling room. He shut out Deirdre, didn't look at her. He was fondling the Filipino girl, fondling her seething golden buttocks....

He pulled Deirdre, moaning, up to her hands and knees. He was ready and he grasped himself and threw his weight on her from behind, trying, in the confusion of moist hair and quivering flesh, to enter her.

But he was too soft.

'Here,' she said, and turned on her back.

He went down on her, and she took the soft, useless cartridge of flesh in her hand and kneaded it and tried to push it into herself.

The gust of excitement came again for her and finally chilled him. He pulled away.

'Please try,' she said. 'Please try.'

He sat up and patted the plumpness at his middle. 'I don't feel like it.'

She repressed her quivering and lay back with closed eyes for a moment.

Then she eased herself over to sit beside him. She bent her head towards his groin. 'My little man is tired. He's been working too hard.'

'Don't,' he said.

'Shall I give it a kiss,' she said, bending lower.

He sighed and pushed her away.

'It's easy for you,' he said. 'You're always ready for it.'

'What a man! You can't even screw your own wife!'

'I can't screw with you.'

'Talk about Harry Beech! He's a man. He sure can screw.'

'Got a prick a foot long, has he?'

'He's better at it than you ever were.'

'Deirdre, I can't make love to you. I don't want you. I don't love you. I don't even like you much. Some time we should talk about divorce.'

Deirdre lay back on the bed on her back while her hands appraised her belly and breasts: not bad for a woman in her late thirties. The breasts were still full and her skin firm. It could be the body of a girl ten years younger. The care paid off.

'I don't think I'll have too much trouble in finding someone else,' she said. 'I think now's an excellent time to discuss it. Very appropriate.'

He shrugged. 'Summit meeting at the scene of the disaster.'

'Precisely. Oh there's one thing I want to know....'

'What?'

'Who will you get to support you now? Or have you someone in mind?'

He compressed his mouth tight for a moment before replying. 'You want to cut my balls off at every opportunity you get, don't you?'

'It's typical of you to see things in terms of your masculinity. Perhaps it's because you're no good in bed. Face facts, Richard. This is a beautiful home. I bought it. It cost a hundred thousand pounds six years ago. Remember? You put something in. Ten or twenty thousand, was it? You earn a lot and you're clever, but, Richard, you still spend much more than you earn, and I provide it.'

'I'll make enough out of the Hong Kong deal to be independent of you.'

'Ah, I see,' she said, propping herself up on one elbow. 'This is the big one, is it? It had to be. And now the rich little worm can turn. Chuck poor—well, rich—old Deirdre aside. Don't you still need a sexy spy to run round compromising Libra's enemies, Richard? Like Steve Macy. Sorry my charms couldn't keep him in London. Whatever happened to him?'

Richard West started at the name. 'He vanished back into the woodwork.'

'Philip had already told me you were going to make a lot of money on the Hong Kong deal....'

'You're very pally. You can't get him into bed, you know.'

'I am a big shareholder, after all. That isn't all Philip told me.'

'What else?' he asked suspiciously.

'That you have a deadline on payment of a ten million pounds overdraft liability. That you are three million over the limit. That you have ten days to cure it or the bank will put in a receiver.'

'Philip has been talking, but then he always grovelled before money. We've pulled off the consortium deal. We have a lot of money to come in. Some already has. In addition Harry has nearly completed negotiations for a long-term Eurodollar loan. We'll get through.'

Deirdre West got up from the bed and slipped on a lined white satin robe. She tossed her hair. 'You may get through. I have a lot of faith in you. But what would be your objective advice to a client who had a large holding of shares in a company that was within ten days of receivership? Within ten days those shares could go from—250 is it at the moment?—to next to nothing.'

Richard West took his wife by the arm and pulled her away from the mirror to face him.

'You don't mean you'll sell?'

'What on earth do you expect me to do?'

'This is a new piece of bitchery you've thought of because of the divorce, isn't it?'

She smiled wanly. 'Not at all. The instructions to sell have already been given. I look after my money, Richard. I keep my own counsel. You know that. Daddy always said——'

'Fuck your Daddy. You've ruined our voting position and you could start a run on the stock market.'

'It will be done discreetly, but I'm getting out,' she said flatly.

His face was grey and trembling. 'You—you never consulted me—never mentioned——'

'And with good reason. You're only concerned with yourself.'

She began to brush her long blonde hair with long, easy strokes.

Richard West snatched the brush away and threw it across the room.

His wife faced him resignedly, still mildly amused at his concern.

'Now I'm going to tell you something, you clever bitch, something that will make you change your mind because if you don't——' He waved his fist at her. 'Your hero Harry Beech—and Challis too—will end up in jail—not to mention myself—if Libra goes under——'

'Oh what rubbish is this? Get hold of yourself, Richard!'

'I'll tell you what your hero Harry Beech did: he sold fifty million pounds' worth of planes to First Bankers. Those planes are in a junk yard in Hong Kong. Worth nothing.'

'Nothing?' she echoed.

She paled and sat slowly down on the bed.

'But how did this *happen*?' she asked.

'Harry.'

'Harry?' she asked incredulously.

37

New York

Steve Macy flew in to Kennedy Airport from California on the Red Eye.

He yawned and grabbed his case and eased himself into

the mill race of passengers from the Tri-Star. It was seven-thirty, New York time.

He had a day's work ahead, and eighteen hours of flying from Hong Kong behind. His head felt lousy. Highballs weren't such a great anaesthetic anyway.

A hundred years later he was poured out of a taxi at the Greenwich Village apartment.

He let himself in. It was damp and dreary. He wondered how Chrissy was, and he rang her.

He felt a little bit more real when the child's voice answered.

He was concerned and she was matter-of-fact: as though he'd seen her yesterday: 'I don't have to go to school till this afternoon, Daddy.'

That was the big news. 'Why, darling?'

'I gotta see the dentist at eleven-thirty.'

'Hey, you can come over and say hullo now, if you like.'

'Oh great! Patsy'll bring me,' Chrissy said with certainty, and hung up the phone.

Patsy was the sister of the Negro janitor, who enjoyed acting as nanny and riding Chrissy round the town in cabs.

He looked at the dead phone and put it down. He'd never understand kids.

He went into the kitchen, put some coffee in the percolator and began to explore the refrigerator. He'd started the bacon and eggs when the door bell rang.

He opened the door and found it wasn't the plump Patsy with Chris: it was his ex-wife, Barbara.

As he swept the child into his arms, he had time to note the immaculate permanent wave and tight mouth of his ex-wife.

When he finally put the child down, Barbara was waiting and he was dreading.

'I had to bring Chris. Patsy wasn't around. I wish you'd make some arrangements before you start issuing orders ... what's the matter with you, anyway, Steve?'

Her irritation had passed into curiosity.

He tried to look innocent. 'Nothing. I'm tired——'

'Tired? If you look this way when you're tired, you must be really sick! Your complexion—it's grey, you've got dark

circles under your eyes. Your hands! What's happened to them? Have you had an accident or something?'

Steve Macy scratched his head with one of his taped hands. 'I've had a few ups and downs, but I'm OK.'

'I've never seen anything like that suit. It makes you look worse.'

'A little man in Hong Kong made it in five minutes.'

The phone rang.

He took it. 'Herb?'

'Steve my boy, get over to Battery Towers at ten, will you. First Bankers Boardroom. You're a key man. I dunno what we're goin' to do——'

'Who'll be there?'

'You'll see soon enough.'

'Listen, I don't have a report in writing. At the moment, my hands won't hold a pencil.'

'You. That's all we want. At ten.'

Steve Macy hung up. He slipped off his jacket. 'Say, this is rough, isn't it?' he said, examining it.

'And so are you. I'll get you breakfast. Bacon and egg. Toast. Coffee. Right?'

Macy agreed reluctantly. He hadn't the energy to resist a maternal takeover. In a perverse way, Barbara really cared.

He peeled off his shirt and made for the bathroom. 'I'll shower and shave.'

He talked baby-talk to Christine who made faces at him through the glass door of the shower cabinet. He let the hot jet of water burn into the back of his neck and felt better.

He could smell the bacon and eggs and for the first time in weeks, he felt hungry.

They all ate together; it was like old times until Barbara fired the shot she'd been saving.

'Did you see Linda Hall?' she asked, the good humour she'd produced for the meal gone.

He looked at her woodenly without answering.

'How is it between you?' she pressed.

'The same.'

'You ought to try and make it up with her. She's the one for you; but then I don't suppose you can fool her either——'

He switched into chatter with Chrissy. He couldn't answer the unanswerable.

Women. He blotted them out of his mind as the cab weaved its way to Battery Park.

Going up in the elevator to the top of the Towers he had a chance to check his presence in the mirror. He smoothed the old grey suit. It was better than the Hong Kong one, but not much. Barbara was right, the hammering he'd taken was showing around the eyes. Why in hell was he going on?

He straightened the stringy tie and smoothed his collar. Barbara regarded him as a lackey for taking the job. The hell with it! She was his ex-wife. She didn't understand ... but up to a point, he knew damn well she was right. Ex-wives knew too much!

He flexed his hands, looking down at them. They were still bruised and swollen. She'd never understand why he should have endured physical hazards for First Bankers. It was easier to shrug it off as a car accident.

Steve Macy was met at the top by a receptionist and he followed her attractive backside along the carpeted corridors. Why was he going on? Because he was Mr Valiant-for-Truth? Nope. He was working for money. The desire to show that *he* was right, and that *they*, Harry Beech, Linda, the Libra gorillas, Prescott and First Bankers, that they were wrong, was as natural to him as the thread of desire that connected him to the wiggling bottom of the girl who marched in front.

And nothing, not even loss of the job, was going to stop him.

The receptionist flashed a couple of rows of teeth at him and held open the Boardroom door.

Macy's chest tightened involuntarily as he focused on the two men who were alone in the big room: West and Challis.

They were sitting together at one end of the room, a long way away, looking out at the ocean view and the Statue of Liberty, and yet not looking at anything. They started when they saw him.

There was no time for preliminaries. A door at the other end of the room opened and Klein and Prescott appeared.

Prescott touched Macy's hand and waved him to a seat near Challis and West.

'Where's Beech?' Prescott asked.

'He's tied up in Europe,' West said.

'He'll be tied up in jail before long,' Prescott snapped.

'Now, I don't——' West began.

'You know why I called this meeting. You all know, though I haven't talked to any one of you except Klein.'

'I'll get a stenographer in,' Klein said.

'Nobody,' Prescott said. 'No assistants, no secretaries. What I'm going to say will only take a minute.'

West and Challis listened woodenly.

'I want my money back,' Prescott said. 'The deal's off. I want fifteen million dollars right now.'

Challis managed a steely smile. 'I don't think one can reverse months and months of work in one direction at an instant.'

'Bullshit!' Prescott said. 'Now you listen——'

'A moment, Orville,' Klein cut in calmly. 'I think Libra has to make arrangements to return that money and tear up the contracts. If it does, well, if it does, I guess we'll have to turn round and admit we've been taken for a ride, but it could have been worse. If Libra doesn't return the money——'

'We'll sue! We'll sue for fraud!'

'It's not quite as simple as you make out. Remember we have another partner in the consortium—Oriental Freight. We can't move without reference to them.' Richard West sat back to observe the effect of his words on the distraught Prescott.

Steve Macy was the spectator, and the catalyst. It was his presence that rendered all the explanations unnecessary. He was enjoying the confrontation.

He had to admit that Challis and West were very cool: they were a shade paler and more subdued than usual, but cool.

Prescott, facing them, was quivering with a rage he could not contain. Klein remained icy and cautious.

'Oriental Freight is your worry,' Prescott said. 'I want that fifteen million.'

'If you don't pay, the consequences will be serious for Libra,' Klein said. 'Libra won't have much of a credit rating by the time we've finished.'

'You mean you'd jeopardize the fifteen million you've contributed by trying to ruin us?' Challis asked.

'Sounds very silly to me,' West echoed.

'Do you want to face an action for fraud? Do you want the world to know what a liar your Harry Beech is?' Prescott said.

'I realize you're upset,' West said suavely, 'but I don't know what you mean by fraud. We've done nothing wrong.'

'You mean—you——' Prescott choked.

'Surely you don't deny Mr Macy's discovery of those junk planes,' Klein asked.

'I was wondering why Mr Macy was here. I don't know what he thinks he discovered——'

Prescott leaned across the table and shook his finger under West's nose: 'Listen here. I had a team of men hire a helicopter and examine that enclosure of yours near Hong Kong airport. They reported to me. They confirmed what Mr Macy already told me—the planes in there are junk.'

Challis looked at West in surprise. 'I imagine he means the Libra repair area.'

'That must be it,' West said innocently.

'Repairs! Taaa——' Prescott dismissed the suggestion.

'I think you better get your men to look more closely. Libra has only one area near Kai Tak airport, and if you care to examine it you'll find it swarming with mechanics.' West was mild, chiding.

'Perhaps Mr Prescott's observers had a look at lunchtime,' Challis said. 'When the men were resting.'

Steve Macy whistled inaudibly through his teeth. 'No damn mechanics within miles of the place,' he said. The Libra pair were hamming it superbly, he had to admit. They were unruffled.

Prescott had sensed the toughness of the pair and recovered a little of his sagacity: 'You can *say* you're repairing those aircraft, but you can't conjure fifty million dollars' worth out of junk.'

'But we don't have to,' West replied. 'You knew all about the area when you signed the contracts. You must have accepted it.'

'We never knew a thing,' Klein said emphatically.

'I'd never have signed in a hundred years if I'd known,' Prescott said.

Challis and West looked at each other. 'That's odd,' Challis said. 'Our information is that Mr Macy visited the property before the deal was signed. He was your—your investigator. I take it that you listen to what he says?'

'I was held at the property till it was too late to see Mr Prescott before the deal was signed,' Macy said.

'Really?' Richard West said, lighting the small cigar he had been fingering. 'Doesn't sound like much of a fraud case to me——'

'Nor me,' Philip Challis said. 'A repair area you want to call a junk shop——'

'And a President who signs a deal after one of his lawyers has made this momentous discovery, either without bothering to get in touch with him, or in spite of it.' Richard West surrounded himself with a comforting mantle of blue smoke.

'Very clever,' Klein said.

'I'm gonna see Harry Beech personally——' Prescott announced.

'I think we should go,' West said.

The two men rose without haste and began to move to the door.

'I think we should meet at another time soon—with Harry—and re-establish our friendly relationship,' Challis said.

'Impossible,' Prescott retorted. 'I'm gonna sue. You'll get no more money out of me.'

'I'd think twice about it, if I were you,' West said. 'We've made plans for the second instalment of fifteen million due at the end of the month. Non-payment will be an embarrassment. That, and publicity saying that you were breaking up the consortium would endanger the company. It might create a liquidity crisis.'

'And First Bankers would lose all its money,' Klein said.

'That's a possibility you'll have to consider,' West said.

'I have to keep feeding you with money to safeguard what you've already robbed?' Prescott asked.

'I wouldn't put it so crudely,' West said. 'Libra's a viable, profitable company. After all, you spent months checking that out, didn't you?'

The two Libra men nodded courteously as they went out.

'We'll be at the Algonquin for the rest of the day if you want to speak,' Challis said as a parting shot.

Orville Prescott was huddled up at the boardroom table: 'They have all the answers.'

'Now, Orville——' Klein began.

'What's your opinion, Mr Macy?' Prescott interrupted.

'Does it matter? You won't take any notice.'

'Tell us what you think, Steve,' Klein said.

'I think you should cut your losses and get out. Sue for your money.'

'But if I go on with my side, I may be able to get into a better position to get *all* the money out later,' Prescott said.

'You don't like taking a loss, do you?' Macy said.

'You're darn right I don't. Not a loss of fifteen million,' Prescott declared.

'Libra will go bust, that's my hunch,' Macy said.

'Do you have any hard facts, Steve?' Klein asked.

'It's a hunch.'

'I can't let my life depend on a hunch of yours,' Prescott said.

'I didn't expect you to listen to me, but do you seriously think that the men who pulled off this aircraft thing could be running an operation that in other respects is one hundred per cent clean?'

Prescott's head was shrunken. The enlarged eyes behind the spectacles were moist.

Being boss of First Bankers meant nothing to Macy. 'You're making me cry,' he said.

38

London

Everard Harwood had cleared all the papers from his desk and dictated the day's letters to his secretary. The offices of Bender, Harwood & Co. outside the sound-proof oaken panels of the room were full of activity; but inside was a haven of quietness.

Harwood stood at his favourite place by the window and contemplated the grimy pillars and cornices of Old Broad Street. He opened the cubicle behind his desk and examined himself in the full-length mirror. He smoothed a crease across the shoulder of his suit.

'Mr Philip Challis calling,' his secretary said on the intercom.

He would have to check up and see how the disposal was getting on first. 'I'll call him back,' he answered without departing from the mirror.

'He's calling from New York.'

'I don't mind if he's calling from Afghanistan....'

He shut the mirror door and sat down at his desk, swivelling the chair in frustration. 'All right then, I'll talk to him. Damn nuisance.'

Challis's voice echoed: 'How's Libra doing?'

'Hullo, Philip, are you so worried?'

The transatlantic line was not capable of carrying fine nuances. Challis nearly had to shout: 'I'm not worried....'

'As a matter of fact, Philip, Libra is down another five points this afternoon. That makes fifteen for the week. Just a temporary setback, I'm sure.'

'I have another job for you. That's why I'm ringing.'

'Good. Tell me.'

'Another 750,000 Libra ordinaries.'

'*More* Libra?' Harwood said incredulously.

'This is—a special friend——'

'Quite,' Harwood said, narrowing his eyes as he stared up at the chandelier.

'How much have you sold so far?' Challis asked.

'About half, I should say.'

'Can you get a move on?'

'Well, my dear chap, I've told you the price is sagging. One can't tell how much selling pressure there is, but obviously, some is ours.'

'I'd like to get all the shares sold in, say, a week.'

'A week?' Harwood said, letting out a bark of annoyance at the same time. 'I'm using five other brokers, and that's bound to affect the market.'

'Everard, I'm dealing exclusively with you because I believe you can best place these numbers. I'd guess you are the only one who has any large quantity of shares for sale, and I want to get rid of the lot as soon as possible.'

'At what price?'

'The best you can.'

'It would be best to do a block deal at a discount.'

'Not if I have to wait.'

'I see,' Harwood said heavily.

'What do you mean? I can assure you Everard, this is a private thing, nothing to do with Libra. Libra's fine.'

'Of course,' Harwood replied blandly. 'All I'm suggesting is that you give the market time to recover. It's worth tens of thousands to you.'

'I want to go ahead, regardless,' Challis said.

'You'll swamp the market. Send the price way down. Don't be silly.'

'I want to go ahead.'

'It's all a matter of confidence, you see. Once that price starts to fall—well, it already has—but if it goes on, others will jump on the bandwagon too and sell.'

'I insist,' Challis said. 'I'll let you have the papers on the new lot when I get back to London tomorrow.'

'Libra's very widely held by banks and insurance companies, you know. They'll be watching like eagles if the price falls.'

'I know. But they move slowly. They won't sell. They've confidence in Libra.'

'If that's the way you want it,' Harwood said, ending the conversation.

Harwood stood up and allowed himself one more glance

in the mirror. One would have to be careful. He smelt danger. He didn't analyse shares as rationally as some brokers. He had feelings about them. He was being asked to drop a huge quantity of shares quickly, at any price. Something was afoot.

Harwood pressed the intercom button: 'Miss Sinclair, bring in my trust file, please.'

'The family trust?'

'Yes. I want to look at the portfolio.'

Miss Sinclair appeared in the room in a moment with a manila folder.

'I want to see how much Libra we are holding.'

'200,000. I remember. You haven't sold any since I typed the list.'

Harwood perused the list of shares. At today's prices he'd made a tidy profit on Libra. It was a pity to have to sell when Libra seemed set for new things. But it was an emotional decision with him; even if the shares went up fifty points in the next week, he would have to sell. That was how one survived in the financial jungle.

He replaced the paper in the file and handed it back to Miss Sinclair. 'I'd like some coffee now—oh yes, and get Rupert Baker on the telephone, please.'

Rupert Baker was a stock jobber. The man who trades in shares as a principal. He had been approached to take the portion of shares which Harwood's firm were keeping, the portion which had not been filtered off to other brokers to muffle the effect on the market.

'I've taken 100,000 from Bob Forrest at 235,' Baker said, 'and I'd like to leave it a day or so for the rest.'

Baker was going to try to sell the balance before he bought them. It was sure money. 'What did you get for the 100,000?'

'245,' Baker said.

'Nice,' Harwood muttered.

'It's a sound share.'

'Certainly,' Harwood said. 'Very sound. Interesting prospects at the moment. Probably a bonus issue soon. I'd like you to take another 100,000 now.'

'That's a quarter-million, near enough. I don't know.'

'I'll make it 230.'

'Done,' Baker said. 'That leaves me with 50,000 available on your books.'

'Correct.' Harwood said. 'I'll leave you to deal with Forrest about that.'

Harwood replaced the telephone and smoothed the folds of skin round his throat. His family trust shares would of course have to be those sold first. One's first duty was to oneself. The next thing was to accomplish the task for the client, and make a profit out of doing so.

Everard Harwood reached for his private-line telephone. This was a number he had to dial himself. He started to speak without any preliminaries: 'Tell each of the brokers handling Libra to sell immediately at best price ... give each one of them special private reasons, you know ... I leave it to you ... best price.'

He buzzed Miss Sinclair. 'Make a note would you—I've sold my Libra at 230 to Baker. Get the paper together for him....'

'Yes Mr Harwood. Mr Forrest's been trying to reach you from 'Change. He said to tell you Libra's down. He didn't mention how much.'

'Is that so?' Harwood said, unable to stifle a certain surge of satisfaction. Buying and selling shares was like driving a sports car very fast.

'I think I'll slip down there myself,' he added. 'Oh, by the way, Miss Sinclair—those shares of mine: it's 100,000 at 235 and the rest at 230.'

Everard Harwood took an umbrella from the stand and let himself out of the side door of his office which opened directly on to the first-floor landing. He started down the marble stairs on a journey along Old Broad Street and into the Stock Exchange which would take a brisk three and a half minutes or a casual four.

Today it was brisk. Now that he was personally safe he felt interested and even a little excited at the Libra developments. The street was grey, and the clerks and brokers coming and going seemed dazed: he would have liked to have tapped one of them on the shoulder, assuming he had time to pause, and talk of the fascinating question mark over Libra. A

question mark he had a hand in writing.

He made his way quickly to the main floor: there, in the apparently haphazard collection of wooden stands, with their blackboards dashed with figures, he picked up a hieroglyphic telling that Libra sellers were offering at 200.

And he had managed 230 and 235.

'I'm caught with that last 100,000,' Baker said, pushing out from a knot of men towards him. 'I'm letting them go at 200. I can get 180 and that's best so far.'

Harwood merely inclined his head slightly. The game was hazardous. Baker might make ten thousand pounds in a day and lose it the next.

'Seems to be a lot of selling pressure,' Baker said. 'Can't understand it. Price should be going up, not down.'

'Hang on then,' Harwood said.

Baker paused for a moment when a man whispered something to him, and brought up his book. He scribbled something.

'I've got rid of 20,000 at 200. It's a start,' he said.

Baker moved away from Harwood, from jobber to jobber, whispering, nodding, sometimes making an entry in his book, buying, selling....

'Mr Harwood—Mr Harwood——'

He turned to an anxious Robert Forrest.

'Have you seen the Libra sag, Mr Harwood?' Forrest asked.

'Yes. Quite puzzling.'

'There's a rumour going round that the consortium deal is off, that First Bankers aren't going to back Libra any more ....'

'It's nonsense. I was talking to Philip Challis today and he would have told me, I'm sure,' Harwood said.

'I don't know what to make of it,' Forrest said.

'Why should we worry? You placed some with Baker very nicely. I thought you'd given them away when he told me 235, but it looks as though you did well,' Harwood said, taking Robert Forrest confidentially by the arm, and leading him out of earshot.

'I must tell you,' he added, 'that I pressed Baker to take another 100,000 at 230.'

'You had some more?' Forrest asked, preoccupied with thoughts outside their conversation.

'As a matter of fact, the 200,000 that Baker took were all mine....'

'Why? Why?' Forrest asked raising his voice at the immaculate, smug figure that still clung to his arm.

'I just decided to get rid of them, that's all,' he said airily. 'And I have another 100,000 for you to look after: that makes 250,000 you have left!'

'How in hell can I drop those with the market the way it is? It may pick up in a week, a month....'

'Don't worry, Robert my boy. Get rid of them. Best price.'

Robert Forrest's face was lined and yellow. He looked as though he might be ill.

'*Any* price?' he asked.

'Any,' Harwood said, catching sight of himself in a glass door and readjusting his tie. 'Just get rid of them.'

Everard Harwood turned away to speak to an acquaintance.

Robert Forrest swayed on his feet. The brisk hustle of the floor that had always delighted him made his head ache.

He went towards one of the booth telephones.

A young clerk in a swaggerish suit dashed in front of him. 'Excuse me, old chap, that's ours,' he said, picking up the receiver himself.

Forrest went into the next booth and rang Sturdy.

'Get down here. Now.'

'But I can't. It's inconvenient,' Sturdy said.

Forrest hesitated at first. 'You know what's happened?'

'I can guess,' Sturdy said.

'You don't seem worried,' Forrest replied in a drained voice.

'I have you to look after things, don't I? You've bought something wrong. Sell it. Cut your losses. Sell.'

'I don't know whether there's even a market except to nearly give them away,' Forrest said.

Sturdy paused, breathing deliberately. 'All right, I'll come down.'

Forrest turned back to the room. The atmosphere had changed. Even in his shocked state he was aware of it. The

brisk flippancy of normal business was nowhere in evidence round the traditional dealers in Libra shares. The crowds had gathered round the dealers and there was a brooding tension.

A man came past him heading for the door, snarling, '160 for Libra? Bloody ridiculous!'

It was two minutes to close of business.

Robert Forrest could see Rupert Baker, still bending over the crowd, advising, exhorting, buying and selling; noting up the book that contained the fateful line: 'Sold FS Syn 50,000 Libra 245'.

He couldn't move. The room quivered, changed into moving coloured splinters, while the sums that he was so used to doing momentarily in his head, burned like electric signs: a purchase at 245 and a sale at 160 left a deficiency of more than £42,000.

His assets were five well-cut suits, a Mercedes coupé and a solid gold wristlet watch.

39

Macy tasted the martini, and the dry scent of the gin was like a small, delightful explosion in his head.

The fatigue of the night flight from New York lifted. He was quite comfortable in the new suit; it was ready made, but good. And what could you do if you only had half an hour to spare?

Tiberio's was filling up with the lunchtime crowd. The table Macy had reserved was quiet, at the back. He took another sip of the martini and opened *The Times* at the business page.

The headline hit him.

SUDDEN DROP IN LIBRA SHARES

Doubts about Trading Future

Rumours that all is not well with the new Libra Consortium, backed by First Bankers of New York to the tune of fifty million dollars, have hit the once buoyant share price of Libra hard. Libra has never been in the blue chip class

but it has had a well-deserved reputation as a steady performer under the sometimes brilliant Chairmanship of Harry Beech. Libra opened yesterday at 250 after ailing 20 points in the last two months, to close at 160....

'Hullo, Steve.'

Linda Hall had slid gently into the chair opposite and dropped her handbag and gloves on another before he could put the paper away.

'Hullo, Linda. I was engrossed in ... this,' Macy replied, pointing at the article.

'It's nasty, isn't it? And quite beyond me.'

'It's not beyond me, Linda. Libra's on the slippery slope.'

'I don't believe that for a moment, Steve. The share price has fluctuated before this.'

'But the deal is off,' Macy said.

The waiter put a gin and tonic before her. 'You remembered,' she smiled. 'I've heard differently about the Consortium.'

'I was at the meeting in New York with West and Challis.'

'You move in the stratosphere,' she said, impressed. Then she reverted to her incisive, direct, self: 'Why are you here again, Steve?'

'To see you.'

'Is that all?' she asked softly.

'No.'

'What else?'

He hesitated and drew on his cigarette. 'I guess I can tell you. The lid's going to come off the whole thing anyway.'

'What do you mean?'

'I told you that in the deal Libra pushed the value of their shares up by fifty million dollars on planes that are junk. First Bankers went ahead and signed the papers *before* I found out about the fraud—that's what it was, a fraud. Orville Prescott, the President, didn't have any faith in me, and he went ahead on his own. First Bankers parted with fifteen million dollars as a first instalment of their funding. Now they want to back out. Libra is short of money and can't repay. In

fact, West said that if First Bankers don't stay in, they'll endanger Libra. First Bankers are very unhappy.'

'You mean Richard West agrees he was caught in a fraud,' she asked, finishing the drink.

'No. Both he and Challis are about as brazen as you can be....'

'Steve, isn't there some explanation? I know you mean well, but....'

'I can only tell you what I know, Linda. Prescott was out of his mind. He didn't know whether to back out of the Consortium or go on. But he's had to tell the Board of First Bankers. Net result is he's going to get the sack. You see, he appointed me as a kind of special investigator, at the request of Board members, and then he goes ahead without my report. The dissidents on the Board, led by a man called Ullman, have persuaded Prescott to stand down until they can call a special meeting, and in the meantime they've sent me here as a watchdog to advise them further. But First Bankers are definitely to back out of the Consortium.'

Linda touched her brow. 'I can't believe this,' she said.

She looked very young, and very unlike the capable executive she was.

'Can you believe that Libra hired a killer with a speedboat to get me as I crossed Hong Kong harbour in a water taxi?' he asked.

'Why, Steve? Why?'

'Because they wanted to stop me reporting to First Bankers. And they nearly did. It was sheer luck that I was fished out of the sea by a passing boat.'

'I'd better have another drink,' she said.

'We'll both have another.'

She was thoughtful during the steak and salad.

He took a long draught of the claret he had bought to oil the steak. What did she have? What did she have that made him feel pretty good? Made him keep his eyes off the pair of ankles at the next table?

She was the most unboring woman he'd ever known. It didn't matter why.

She was a bloody difficult woman, that was for sure.

She thawed over the espresso and brandy.

'I can't understand how it all came about, if you're right,' she said. 'I mean people like Richard West ... he may be a bit sharp, but surely he's ...'

Her voice tailed off.

'A slow rot,' Macy said.

'But dishonesty like shutting up valueless planes in a yard and pretending they're in working order ...' she said.

'It's a slow process, but you get used to the slime.'

'But where does it *start*? I mean it's a big undertaking to lock those planes away. Dozens must know about it.'

Macy sprawled back in his chair, replete. The brandy burned a new clarity into his thoughts.

'It starts from the top, like a noxious vapour, seeping down, contaminating, invisible....'

'Rhetoric and brandy,' she smiled.

He lit a cigar, disguising the hurt.

'Harry,' he said, 'is the image of all we regard as worldly success; but he's utterly unscrupulous, a monster under a veneer of calm and reason.'

Her eyes were searching him deeply.

'He corrupts,' Macy said, 'and he even got to you....'

She winced almost imperceptibly and turned away. 'You've never met him.'

'I shall,' Steve Macy said.

40

Richard West threw the *Financial Times* aside in disgust as the limousine drifted to the kerb outside the Libra Building in Pall Mall.

He eased a finger inside his collar as he went up the steps. A weight problem, too. He stifled a yawn. He was leaden with tiredness after the New York meetings and the flight to London.

There was Tidy the messenger at his desk as usual. The man was giving as much attention to the note he was writing as

if he was signing the Rome Treaty. The polished bald head. Marble. Pure marble, like the pillars.

'Mornin', Mr West.'

'Good morning, Tidy.'

'Mr West,' Tidy began, rising from the desk, 'I wondered——'

'Not now, Tidy,' Richard West said as he sailed into the lift. 'See my secretary, will you?'

The lift shut Tidy out. Damn nuisance. For a moment he envied the man sitting down there with his pencil and notebook, trotting round from department to department, carrying letters round the city. Not a care in the world. That's why he always looked the same. Pure marble.

The bosom of the faithful Drake was also in its accustomed position behind the typewriter when Richard West stalked out of the lift, past her, and through the open door of his office.

She looked up only momentarily, nervously. 'Have a nice——?'

'Terrible!' he cut in, and slammed the door.

He flipped through the pile of mail on his blotter. Financial requirements, demands. A letter from Barclays, their current-account bankers, delivered by hand the previous day, requesting an immediate meeting. Written after the Stock Exchange closed no doubt. They were scared.

'Richard, I want to talk to you,' a timorous voice said.

West looked up at his secretary who was speaking without that bold, efficient edge he admired so much. She had stolen in like a mouse.

'Christ, Corinne! Not now.'

'I want to speak——' she persisted.

'Sure. We'll talk. We'll have lunch. Not here. Not *now*,' he said, the blood rising in his face.

'When?' she asked, almost returning to her metallic secretary's voice. 'Today?'

'Today? No. Not today.'

'Tomorrow?'

'Yes, tomorrow, or the next day.'

'Richard....'

'Look in my appointment book will you? Arrange it . . . and sit down and take this dictation.'

She went out and returned with her book in a moment. She was quieted.

Richard West didn't look at her face, her eyes, the pain, the unspoken accusation. One of the things he would discuss with her when they did talk was transferring her to another department. Stupid of him to have touched her in the first place. A long evening's work. A few gins before going home. Who could be expected to keep his paws off those tits?

'This is a press release,' West said. 'As soon as you've typed it, get hold of the Publicity Director, and tell him that he personally is to see it gets the widest possible coverage. Immediately. You understand? Immediately.'

He still didn't look at her. It put him off. Off her, and off the job.

'Libra announces,' he said, 'that the new multi-million-dollar Consortium involving First Bankers of New York and Oriental Freight of Hong Kong will be commencing operations based primarily in Hong Kong immediately. The Consortium is already considering contracts for the purchase of modified Tri-Stars. Oriental Freight have brought their fleet of modern tankers and ore carriers into the new partnership. A special line of credit will be available from First Bankers. Libra will hold a one third share and contribute airline operation know-how. The Consortium will be the biggest and most comprehensive transport complex in the world when it reaches its third stage of development in three years' time, essentially based on the Pacific Basin, but reaching to all parts of the globe. The partners envisage an initial investment in the first year of three hundred million dollars and they forecast that revenue from operations will meet the operating costs in the first year.'

West looked out of the window at the bright, cloud-flecked sky. It was a sane announcement. Modest and sane.

'That's it,' he said.

'Yes, Mr West,' Corinne Drake said. 'I didn't know you were thinking of more Tri-Stars,' she said, anxious to show things had returned to a business footing.

Richard West grimaced. 'We're not,' he said. One could at least be honest with one's secretary about business.

As Corinne Drake was leaving, he said: 'Get Jordan of Barclays, please, and tell him I'm available any time this morning. It might be better if he came here. Then we can look at any necessary papers....'

'Yes, Mr West.'

'Oh yes, and get Poynton. Try the House of Commons. Ask him to come this morning. It's urgent. The Boardroom—see that it's ready. We'll be using it some time today.'

'Yes, Mr West.' As Corinne Drake turned to go out the doorway, Philip Challis came quietly through it.

'You haven't taken much time to sleep, Richard,' Challis said, taking a chair.

'There is no time.'

'Keep a steady nerve and we'll get through it,' Challis replied.

'If we crash, it won't be my nerves, Philip. Deirdre confirmed to me this morning that she has sold her Libra shares.'

'Prudent, perhaps.'

'Your advice?'

'Up to a point.'

'Are you trying to sabotage Libra?'

'Deirdre had a big holding, but not that big.'

'You love her money so much. You know she could afford to give her Libra shares away without noticing it.'

'She has so much precisely because her advisers don't allow her to give things away.'

'It's not Deirdre's shares that worry me,' West said.

'No?'

'You've seen the market report?'

'Of course.'

'Somebody else is in the market. Somebody big.'

Philip Challis's inward-turned lips tautened. 'You think so?'

'I do ... you.'

Challis managed to show his teeth in a smile. 'Absurd,' he said lightly. 'Silly.'

'You've persuaded Deirdre——'

'But Richard, for myself it's different. Very different. With

Deirdre, as an adviser of hers, I'm bound to be objective. For myself, I have a personal connection with Libra. Personal loyalty. And then there's the Stock Exchange: I can't, as a director, sell out without getting into trouble. I value my reputation, Richard.'

'I'm sure you value your reputation. But you only have a nominal holding in Libra according to the share register. Don't try to fool me. All your shares are untraceable to you —held by a dozen nominee companies and trusts.'

'I won't deny it—to you. But I give you my word I wouldn't sell out Libra. Absolutely.'

Richard West scutinized the languid aristocrat in his immaculately pressed, casual suit, with the sleek cap of perfectly clipped black hair. All was at ease except the eyes: they were hooded by heavy lids—dark, deep, alert.

West wasn't convinced.

'I think yesterday's fall is due to uncertainty—uncertainty about the Consortium, uncertainty about our financial position. Think, Richard, how many know: our bankers for example. What sort of leaks do you get there, and to whom? There was a sudden build-up of selling pressure yesterday, by chance, and it'll level out in the next week or two.'

Richard West ordered coffee and took out a cigar. His fortune was in Libra and the Consortium. Irrespective of what this financial spider in his office was doing, could *he* sell out? Now. Or was it too late? Or were they going to get through...? He could sell now, take a heavy loss. Come out with perhaps a couple of hundred thousand dollars. He'd lose his job, his reputation in the City. But he could start again. And if Libra went broke, he'd have no job and no money. Managing Directors of broke companies weren't exactly the most desirable property....

'I hope you believe what I say,' Challis said.

'I have to,' Richard West replied.

The richness of the cigar pleased him. He had a momentary vision of a new life in Canada or the United States. With nearly a quarter-million dollars a man could do a lot ... his name would be mud here. It was no use banking on Deirdre to prop him up. That was finished.

'We're so nearly home, so *nearly*,' West said, holding up both hands in agony. 'If it hadn't been for that two-bit welfare lawyer, we'd be in the clear now. With First Bankers' money we're not only safe, but profitable!'

'Easy, Richard, easy. We may be able to talk First Bankers round. They'll be here this afternoon. We can blur the question about the planes. Concentrate on the future. That's what pulled them in.'

'Without First Bankers, I don't think we can survive,' Richard West said, unmoved by the supple figure of his secretary as she set down their coffee.

'Unless Harry——' Challis began.

'I spoke to Harry from home this morning. He rang from Geneva. The answer to the Eurodollar loan is no.'

Philip Challis returned his cup to the tray. 'I seem to have drunk all your vile coffee without noticing.'

'Harry has another idea.'

'What a fertile man he is!' Challis said. 'As far as I know, every asset we have is charged to the limit and beyond.'

Richard West shook his head uncertainly. 'It's some scheme: the Libra Pension Fund could either sell securities or raise a loan for over three million dollars——'

Challis sniffed: 'We're in deep enough now, Richard. Do you want to go straight to jail?'

'I'm as aware as you are of the problem. So's Harry. Listen: if the Pension Fund either made an advance or sold securities to Libra National Life Insurance, the Life office could assist us, directly or indirectly....'

Challis was interested. 'That's so,' he said slowly. 'That has possibilities....'

'And it would keep the bank happy for a while.'

'Give us the breathing space we need ... yes.'

Miss Drake bleeped.

'Yes?' West said.

'Mr Jordan says he can come over now, Mr West.'

'Fine. Right away.'

While they were waiting for the banker, West let his attention fall to the papers on his desk. But he couldn't work with Challis there. He had no desire to talk to Challis. Oil and

water. Challis was reading a copy of the *New Yorker*.

Richard West absorbed the rank, juicy smell of the cigar butt as he stubbed it out. He could easily go into business in Canada, or Australia perhaps—with money. He had to hedge his bets. Sell out some, but not all his shares. He should phone Everard Harwood as soon as possible. Harwood was discreet....

Twin boys of ten were watching him from the bookshelf. You couldn't be a parent several thousand miles away. Deirdre would let them travel, but was it practicable? So many problems! He looked away from the silver-framed photograph.

'Mr Poynton is here, Mr West,' his secretary said on the intercom.

'I'll see him in a moment. Mr Jordan first.'

The two boys in the photo were reproaching him beneath their ready grins.

When the banker arrived, he came empty-handed and jovial. It was a bad sign.

West and Challis waited for him to speak.

'Nasty drop yesterday,' he said.

'Just a temporary setback, I'd say,' West said confidently.

'Of course,' Challis echoed.

'Certainly,' the banker agreed.

West didn't like it.

'I came to tell you we've reached a final decision about the account.'

'A final decision, Jordan?'

'Quite final.'

'Of course we are going to meet the bank's requirements,' Challis said airily..

'At the end of the month we must ask you to reduce your overdraft to within the ten million pound limit, and the following month by a further three million,' Jordan said.

'I think we can do that,' West said.

'Otherwise we shall appoint a receiver under our debenture.'

'That would be fatal,' West said. 'I'm sure if you're satisfied with our efforts....'

Jordan spoke softly and pleasantly: 'As I said, the decision

is final. It's not open to further discussion. If you're over the limit, the receiver is to go in....'

'And the Libra share price will drop to nothing,' Challis said. 'The company may even have to stop trading—with the loss of thousands of jobs.'

'We've considered all this,' Jordan said.

'It's very unreasonable, I must say,' West said. 'I'll be having a word with one or two of your directors.'

'It won't do any good,' Jordan said, going out.

The door clicked shut.

'It won't do any good,' West said.

'Why have you got Poynton here?' Challis asked.

'I thought we might use him to put out a statement. Coming from him, and linked with a visit to the Minister in connection with the new route licences, it'll command a different public. Help steady the share price.'

'Good idea,' Challis replied. 'Poor little man. He needn't know about First Bankers. I say, did you see him slobbering over those Chinese girls...?'

'Ask Mr Poynton to come in,' West said over the intercom. Poynton's sexual predilections nauseated him.

Miss Drake ushered Poynton in and left him outlined against the brightness of the wide windows while she deposited a silver tray bearing a coffee pot and cups on a side table.

'I'm very glad to see you, Challis. I was going to ask you about those shares you bought—er—bought for me,' Poynton said.

'They've taken a slight drop in the last day or so, but don't worry. They'll pick up in a week or two. Bound to,' Challis replied.

'And then there's this dreadful rumour about the Consortium deal being off. That's not true, is it?'

'Of course not,' West said. 'You tell all your friends at the House of Commons that it's very much on, and if they want to clean up, they'd better get in on a few.'

'I'm so very glad to hear you both say this,' Poynton said, swelling up from his previous crestfallen stance.

'What I'd like you to do, Tony,' West said, 'is to make a

public statement about what we're doing in Hong Kong—give all the details, emphasize how important it is in terms of foreign exchange, increased employment. Cover the new air routes. Show that it's not only our operations but those of all the other industries that will be associated with us—new airports, docks etc. The national interest. You know.'

Poynton's spectacles caught the light and flashed enthusiastically in response: 'Yes. Yes. The national interest. It's more than just the interests of Libra, or the people investing in Libra, it's the whole nation. I can properly explain that without seeming to favour one particular commercial interest. And I can explain the purport of my approach to the Minister on air routes.'

'You can,' West said.

'Indeed,' Challis said.

'It may even help the share price, I think,' Poynton said. His shiny face gleamed cherubically.

'It might,' West said.

'Possibly,' echoed Challis.

'But the important thing, Tony,' West insisted, 'is getting the facts before the public.'

Poynton was suddenly thoughtful: 'I suppose—if the shares never rose—I've—that is, you—I've got to pay the loss on those shares you got me——'

'Don't worry about it,' Challis said. 'It's academic. At a time like this, when great changes are projected, share prices often become unsettled. It's nothing.'

Corinne Drake marched in and, without anyone except West noticing her sleight of hand as she put down and picked up pieces of paper, placed a note in front of her boss: 'Messrs Ullman, Prescott, Klein and Macy in the boardroom.'

'Well, Tony, I have another appointment now. Can I offer you a brandy before you go? No? Don't forget to get the announcement out immediately.'

'I'm going straight to the Commons now to draft it out. I'll release it as soon as I've finished.'

When Poynton had waddled out, West held up the note to Challis.

'Fool,' he said after Poynton.

'Revolting man,' Challis said. 'Perfect qualifications for a Cabinet Minister.'

Richard West walked with Philip Challis along the corridor to the Boardroom.

He saw four stony, accusing faces behind the big table.

Only Herbert Klein managed a gentlemanly nod and stood to shake hands.

41

Joe's is a plain little café in Coptic Court, near the Stock Exchange. It caters for the clerk and the secretary who want a quick sandwich and a cup of coffee.

At half past nine in the morning, Joe's was nearly empty. Bob Forrest sat upright, at a table facing the door.

His face was pale. His eyes were red-rimmed with lack of sleep. He waited.

'Wotcha want, luv?' a waitress said.

Forrest never heard.

The girl shrugged and walked off. 'I've got lots to do, I 'ave,' she said.

Forrest received a shock each time he realized that the shadow in the doorway was not the one he expected.

Eventually the known shadow filled the doorway, and materialized into a hunched, serious John Sturdy.

Sturdy paused before sitting down with Forrest.

'You bastard,' Forrest said.

'Talk like that'll get you nowhere,' Sturdy said with elaborate nonchalance, unbuttoning his coat.

'You didn't arrive at 'Change yesterday. You stood me up last night. I'm glad you came, because I meant what I said on the phone this morning: I'd have gone to your office and dragged you out in front of the senior partner!'

'I hardly think such barbaric tactics are necessary. I'm quite willing to talk,' Sturdy said.

Robert Forrest could see the fear in him, the sweat on the upper lip, the tight face.

'Don't welch on me. Don't back out,' he said.

'What are you going to do?' Sturdy asked.

'What are *we* going to do. You're in this too. I bought for both of us: the FS Syndicate. What a laugh!'

Sturdy ignored him and accepted a cup of coffee from the waitress.

'Wot's yer friend 'aving?' the waitress asked. 'Looks as though 'e's swallowed a couple of cyanide pills.'

The two men stared at each other, sickened by the joke.

'Black coffee,' Sturdy managed.

'We could sell short,' Forrest said.

'How do you know whether the share's going up or down?'

'It'll go down. I feel it ...' Forrest said.

'But my dear Robert, you bought it because you felt it was going up.'

'It'll go down, I tell you! Down, down, down!'

'And like a slick operator, you want to sell short, and pick up all your losses on the way down. Very nice. Very easy. Count me out. You'll incur another twenty or thirty thousand in liabilities, that's what you'll do.'

'You want to do nothing?' Forrest said, his voice rising so that people in the café looked round.

'Be quiet. Panic won't help. The share'll go up. It must. Libra's got a lot going for it. I checked up a few things last night.'

'It'll go down.' Forrest was positive. Sturdy watched.

'What are we going to do! Forty, fifty thousand we're in for! Our careers are over before they've started,' Forrest said.

Then Forrest noted Sturdy's curious stare.

Forrest's hand reached out and the fingers clawed inside Sturdy's collar, pulling him forward across the table, spilling the coffee.

'If you try to back out on me, I swear I'll—I'll——' Forrest didn't finish. He let go of Sturdy's collar. It was enough.

'I'm going over to the Floor now,' he said. 'You'd better be around....'

Bob Forrest passed along Throgmorton Street without an eye for the smart young brokers hurrying along: it was no longer paved with gold.

His eyes, when he went on the Floor, sought only one

thing, the Libra listing, and ignored the faces in the crowd which smiled and nodded towards him in a friendly way, as though they were so many cattle at a market.

Libra was slightly up! There were sellers at 170 and buyers at 165. A flood of warmth filled his chest, a vision of Libra rising to the old level. He'd get out then. Get out and thank his lucky stars. It'd be a long time before he tried this again!

'Telephone, Bob,' somebody said, touching his arm.

He pushed through the knots of talkers towards the phone booth used by his firm: it was Jackie, his secretary.

'Found you! Mr Harwood's been after you this morning. Shall I put him on?' she said.

'No. I'm coming back in a moment. Any idea what he wants?'

'Something to do with Libra. I think he has more to sell.'

'More?' Forrest replied in a choked voice.

'Perhaps I'm wrong,' Jackie said. 'Some news came in on the telex this morning about Libra, did you know?'

'What?'

'It said that First Bankers had announced that as far as they were concerned the Consortium deal was off and they were coming to London for immediate talks with the Libra people.... Are you there...?'

Forrest hung up the phone.

He couldn't see the startled, worried Sturdy. The loathing in him surged.... He'd act alone.

Rupert Baker, the jobber, was busy on the fringes with his notebook and a dark red silk handkerchief drooling from his top pocket.

Forrest approached him. 'Sell 50,000 Libra ordinaries.'

'Hullo, Robert my lad. Libra's having its ups and downs. Fifty, fifty you say? Mmmm. Give you 140.'

'140! But that's ...'

'Sorry. Best I can do. Try someone else.'

'I'll—take—it.'

'Good. Very good. Going to see some fun today with these. Up or down, who knows?'

Up came Baker's book, and he made an entry. 'Buy 50,000 Libra ord. at 140. Bender, Harwood (Forrest)'.

The sum wasn't difficult to do. Bought at 245, sold at 140. They were in for over £50,000.

Broke. Smashed.

'What's the matter, Bob?' Baker said as somebody was already tugging him away. 'You don't look well. Don't take the game too seriously. Not if you want to stay in it as long as I have!'

12.15 p.m. Libra sellers 190, buyers 185

Robert Forrest dragged himself from the office where for most of the morning he'd been staring at the wall, and left for the Stock Exchange.

There was a hope, only a faint hope perhaps, that he could pull off some sort of coup, a daring stroke which would restore his finances. One big buy on a rising market; one big sale on a falling one ... his head ached with the names and numbers of shares.

'Have you heard the news, Bob?'

It was Sturdy, his moroseness gone.

'Look at the Libra price. 190 and rising,' he said.

'It's a long way to go,' Forrest replied.

'But there's been an announcement——'

'That the Consortium is off? I know.'

'No. Not that. I heard that too. And a pretty turn it gave me. No. That was just a rumour,' Sturdy said.

'What have you heard then? Something different?'

'Very. Not an hour ago a Member of Parliament, no less, made a statement confirming the Libra plans, explaining their funding and generally saying how much it was all in the national interest—expansion of air routes, all that.' Sturdy watched expectantly for a kindling of interest.

'Where did you hear this?'

'A smart reporter phoned it straight through to a friend here—and I heard it from him. And it's on all the wire services now.'

'So the Consortium deal is on,' Forrest said, bemused.

'Very definitely. And in the next week—long before our settlement day, Bob, we can expect the price to recover and exceed its old level!'

Sturdy wasn't getting the approval he expected.

'What's wrong?' he asked.

Bob Forrest closed his eyes momentarily. 'I sold out.'

'You *sold*?'

Forrest assented.

'You *sold*? For what *price*, in the name of God?'

'140.'

A confusion of expressions passed across Sturdy's features like a rippling pond.

'You—you—you *fool*...!'

2.30 p.m. Libra sellers 100, buyers 80

Bob Forrest had been to the Carpenter's Arms. He wasn't drunk, but he was insulated.

Sturdy hadn't said any more to him or made any proposals; Sturdy meant to back out, that was certain, leaving him with a liability of fifty thousand.

He was drawn back to the Floor in the hope ... the hope that ... The atmosphere had changed. The relatively calm, even flippant dealings between the knots of men had been replaced by a brooding stiffness.

'Ah, there you are, Robert. I've been trying to get you. Isn't that wretched bleeper of yours working?'

Forrest turned to Everard Harwood who was standing beside him, looking smugly across the hall, and fingered the box of the calling device in his pocket which he'd disconnected.

'I'm sorry, Mr Harwood, it doesn't seem to be working.'

Harwood looked at him queerly. 'I hope you had a good lunch?' he said finally, irritated.

'Oh very good, sir. Very good.'

Harwood preened his tie.

'Trouble, eh?' he said, sensing the atmosphere as readily as Forrest. 'A big share in trouble. Libra has got beyond the operations of Bender, Harwood & Co., Robert. Everyone's coming in now: banks, insurance companies, unit trusts, they'll all know by now, from Land's End to John o' Groats.'

'I thought that announcement by the Member of Parliament might send the share up.'

'It did, it did,' Harwood said, 'for a time. But everybody has

Libra paper, and everybody is wondering whether it wouldn't be prudent to quit. After all, most of them have been long-term holders of Libra. They're not going to drop out in a hurry because they've already made a packet, but now it's dropped so low that they must.'

'That bloody M.P.!' Forrest said. 'What did he have to say that for?'

He wanted to lash out at the M.P., the reporters who started these ridiculous rumours, the brokers who kept each other guessing about how much stock they had for sale—the whole system.

Harwood's lips curled with anticipation: 'There'll be trouble for him, too, I should think.'

'It wasn't genuine?'

'I should think not. Anthony Poynton's a Libra stooge. On the Board. Does a bit of aircraft industry lobbying when the measure's in Libra's interests. They keep him for just such a performance as today's. But he's stuck his neck out.'

'I can't believe he'd deliberately——'

'Robert, my boy. Nobody does these things deliberately. You'll find Poynton's been misinformed.'

The drink made Forrest blunt: 'Why're you so sure?'

'For the very best reason in the world, Robert. Indisputably, the best reason in the world,' Harwood smirked, patting his hair and brushing a flake of imaginary dandruff off his shoulder. 'I had a phone call from a little man in Zurich who looks after the affairs of a Swiss corporation called Cobral.'

Harwood liked riddles.

'I don't understand,' Forrest grated.

'He asked me to sell a big block of Libra shares.'

Harwood was going to make him play the game.

'You had too good a lunch, Robert.'

'Cobral is ... somebody important. Christ! You don't mean...?'

'Indeed I do. Harry Beech.'

'The skunk's selling out his own company!'

'This is between you and me Robert. In the eyes of the world, a small private Swiss corporation with subsidiaries here and in Panama and God knows where, with which Harry

Beech is in no apparent way connected, has sold a vast block of shares. That's all.'

'When was this?' Forrest asked.

'More than a month ago. Six weeks. It was all accomplished before the price started to slide—but I dare say it started the slide.'

The bud that was Robert Forrest the embryonic financier shrivelled even further.

'You're all right, Robert, aren't you?' Harwood asked.

Forrest couldn't tell whether the question was directed to his condition or his finances. He couldn't tell Harwood he'd secretly tried to make a profit from a client's shares.

'Fine.'

When he'd been planning his great coup, when he could virtually see the money in his bank account, and couldn't sleep in his excitement, Libra's big boss had already pushed Libra off the cliff.

'So you see,' Harwood said, 'I couldn't give any weight myself to the burblings of Anthony Poynton, however glossy the prospects in his view.'

And Harwood knew all the time. Knew that Libra was finished.

'What's the matter with you, Forrest?'

'Matter? So Harry Beech has sold out....'

'It happens all the time. Nobody will know or care. Harry has sizeable holdings in his own name. He won't touch those.'

'It's very ... convenient, having a shareholding in another name.'

'Indeed it is. Our company laws are second to none in their convenience,' Harwood said.

'Are any other Libra people quitting?'

'One or two have found very important personal reasons—personal, you understand—why they should sell out of Libra,' Harwood replied.

'Do you think Libra's finished?'

'I doubt it. There's still a fortune to be made or lost there,' Harwood said, shaking his head in pleasant anticipation.

Robert Forrest let out a quick, hysterical laugh.

Harwood raised his eyebrows in astonishment.

'I was going to be a millionaire,' Forrest said. 'And I missed. By a mile!'

42

Robert Forrest mingled with the brokers and jobbers on the floor, jostled from one to the other, scarcely bothering to answer those who greeted him.

He could see no man who looked as badly hurt as himself. He'd seen men crushed by their losses: white, distraught, paralysed. He'd even experienced an odd elation at their plight: it was *them*, not *him*.

Today it was him.

Rupert Baker pushed through towards him.

'Want to do any more Libra, old boy?' he said. 'You know that announcement by the Member of Parliament on Libra?'

'Don't tell me. It was wrong.'

'Absolutely. Drivel.'

'How do you know?'

'First Bankers have issued a statement saying so.'

'The Consortium is off?'

'Yes. So down we go again!' Baker said with a laugh, giving his attention to a man who took his arm.

Robert Forrest had been apart from the foreboding of trouble he had immediately sensed when he returned to the Stock Exchange after lunch, because his trouble had happened. And he lacked the guts to go into the market again; though Baker had tempted him ... he might yet.

Baker's news was abroad, travelling invisibly from man to man on the Floor, like a virus. The groups that had been hushed, speaking in quiet tones, waiting for orders, became more animated.

The call was for buyers. A firm, stern call.

The buyers were there at a dirt-cheap price. The buyer of the morning contemplated a loss of thousands, and became a seller, sought a buyer, a buyer at any price.

Libra spiralled downwards during the afternoon hour, worrying and then alarming each successive tier of buyers as

it sank, made them resell, made them keep up the relentless pressure of Libra shares for sale, 70, 60, 55, 45, 30, 25, 20....

Robert Forrest watched the end of his bad dream. Twenty minutes before the Exchange was due to close the clerks and floor traders were clawing at each other in the confusion of orders and counter-orders, angrily gesticulating at the boards, wrestling for a sight of each other's books, fighting over the right to use a phone first, dialling frantically, shouting into the instrument, shouting across the hall, jostling and cursing at the doors as they struggled to get in and out.

A strange tribe afflicted with a madness which had once been in his blood.

Fingers dug viciously into his upper arm.

Sturdy's sweating face was thrust at him.

'Libra's paper's worth the price of paper! You fucking fool!' Sturdy shouted.

Corinne Drake clipped the papers together and took one last look at them: neat, perfect. She closed the folder and put the papers away in her drawer. It was nearly seven. The Libra building was silent.

She did not particularly want to go home. This was her territory; this luxurious suite of offices was where she lived more than any other place. If you could call it living.

The meeting was over. They were coming out: the First Bankers people, silent, blank faced, almost righteous, except for the young tousle-haired man who strolled behind and gave her a broken grin. He was nice.

And then Challis: icy, enigmatic.

She didn't have to be clairvoyant to know that the meeting had failed.

Corinne Drake found West in the boardroom, slumped over the table, his head on his arms, his face buried. His jacket was off, his sleeves rolled.

She coughed. The cigar smoke was thick.

'Better get up,' she said, unsure whether to make it business or pleasure.

'Get me a drink.'

She went back to his office and mixed a big whisky and soda. He came through and took the glass.

'Thanks,' he said, throwing himself back on the couch. 'Have one yourself.'

'I've already poured it.'

West stared ahead as though she wasn't there.

'What does it mean—about Libra's share quote being suspended today by the Stock Exchange—I mean, I know what it means, but——'

'It means, sweetheart, that I've lost a fortune.'

'You couldn't—couldn't, I suppose—sell?'

'I believe my broker gave away some of my shares.'

'What's going to happen to Libra?'

'I'd get another job if I were you.'

'No! I can't believe it.'

He took a long pull at the drink. 'Money is our lifeblood, Corinne. Cash. We don't have any blood in our veins. We need a transfusion.'

'First Bankers wouldn't help?'

'No. They'll see us go under. That's the way they figure it. Then they'll come in for their share. A rescue operation. A special deal.'

'I just can't believe that Harry Beech could ever get into this trouble.'

'Don't talk about Harry!' West said, pouring a second drink, neat.

She'd never seen Richard West like this before. The smooth, ebullient, aggressive executive had disappeared. He was gaunt, pained. And almost like a hurt little boy in his protests.

He paced the floor. He stopped. For the first time he spoke *to* her: 'You think Harry Beech is going to come down from above like some kind of god and save us all?'

'No, but——'

'Harry's a myth. The greatest myth of the financial world. You think he's some kind of god. A financial genius. That's the myth. He's a man. A man. No more, and perhaps less.'

'But he's been a very successful man, and perhaps——'

'No perhaps. Harry is a man who found that a substitute for having a good business was to gobble up the businesses

of others, but when the diet runs out.... Christ! the things he's led us into!'

She let him subside. 'You'll manage,' she whispered.

He looked at her contemptuously. 'Yeah. I'd better ring home.'

He made the call while she was there. No answer.

'I wonder where the kids are. And the au pair,' he said.

'You still think a lot of them, don't you?' she said.

'Not of her. The kids, yes. And about time. I've put too much time into—into this,' he said, including the building in his gesture.

'I'd better be going,' she murmured.

'Come and sit down here,' he said, patting a place beside him on the couch.

With suitable reluctance, she sat down.

The heavy tiredness of the morning had given place to stark desperation when he'd realized that First Bankers weren't going to budge, that there was a serious possibility of fraud charges. The desperation had been capped by an overwhelming helplessness as hour by hour the brokers had reported the sliding, crashing market.

All that was left was anger, frustration, that somehow fixed on her breasts close beside him, those two live animals he watched playing every day under a tight sweater.

He touched them. She smiled.

Without abandoning his drink, he slid his free hand up her skirt and met the impregnable silken wall of her tights.

'Not here, Richard. Let's go to my place.'

He kissed her hard on the lips.

'You need some supper. I have a nice steak I can cook for you.'

'Okay,' he said, uncertainly. 'Okay.'

But he put the glass down and devoted both arms to her.

'Can't you wait?'

'For a steak, yes.'

She laughed. 'Here?'

'Why not?'

'The cleaners——'

'I don't care,' he said.

Not caring about the cleaners was only a small part of it. She didn't care either.

She stood up and pulled her tights and knickers down to her ankles. He drew her sweater up over her head and loosed the twin animals.

He tore his own shirt open and dropped his trousers.

They embraced hotly standing in the middle of the carpet of his office under the full glare of the fluorescent tubes in the ceiling. Then he pushed her face forward over his desk, over the papers, and gripping a breast in each hand, plunged into her from behind.

The papers were scattered on the floor, and in a few convulsive jerks she had sucked him dry.

It was too quick. But he was spent. Exhausted. The tiredness came back.

He warded fatigue off with another whisky after they had arranged their clothes. She was still burning. He could tell from the brightness of her eyes, the permanent flush of her cheeks.

He looked away. They drank in silence.

'Come on, Richard,' she said at last. 'Tidy yourself up and let's go. The steak's waiting.'

'Corinne, would you mind very much if I passed? I'm not sure I feel up to it tonight.'

He did not look at the smouldering eyes.

Steve Macy was staying at the Connaught this time. It was old, and rather elegant and quiet. He had a suite with a reception room and a huge double bedroom. In gold.

He stretched luxuriously on the bed. What a waste to be alone! He kicked off his shoes and reviewed the day.

Richard West had reasoned and cajoled and pulled every histrionic trick in the book during their four-hour meeting, but it was no good. Ullman was inflexible: money back, or First Bankers would stop at nothing to get it. Prescott hardly contributed, except to back Ullman. He'd lost heart. He'd made the biggest mistake of his life with Libra. And he wasn't a man to make mistakes. Klein was a cipher, pleasant and well paid.

The meeting had ended in a stalemate that was a disaster for Libra.

But it wasn't just in the Libra Boardroom that history was being made: Macy picked up the *Evening Standard*. The headline was two inches high.

STOCK EXCHANGE PANIC
Giant in Trouble
Harry Beech's huge Libra Corporation had its share quote suspended today after a disastrous drop in price. In the view of some brokers the decision which came from the Committee before close of business today was belated. The week has seen dramatic falls in Libra, with a short sharp rise this morning following the announcement by Anthony Poynton, the Member for Chetwood, that Libra had concluded an advantageous deal in Hong Kong with the prestigious First Bankers of New York. After a brief rally in price, an announcement by First Bankers denied the authenticity of the earlier report and the share plunged to a new low of 20. Earlier in the week, Libra had been quoted at 250. Financial sources said that the failure of the deal would probably produce acute liquidity problems for Libra....

So forces were at work which had nothing directly to do with First Bankers. Libra was sick, sicker than any of them had thought. Tomorrow was going to be an interesting day.

He looked at his watch. Eight-thirty. He was going to see Linda. At her place. He'd actually been invited.

But the soft bed made him remember Miranda, the tall, svelte Miranda with her freshness, her lack of complication and easy sensuality.

No harm in stopping at the Cassandra as he strolled through Mayfair. He could get a cab to Bryanston Square, where Linda lived, in Park Lane.

Steve Macy yawned and got up off the bed. He cleaned his teeth and splashed water on his face. He was ready.

A brisk walk brought the brightly lit, striped awning of

the Cassandra into view. The street was dark, but it was eternal day in the Cassandra.

The doorman remembered him and let him pass without a question. A managerial kind of woman blocked his way as he wandered through the carpeted chambers.

'Can I help you, sir?'

'Yes. I'm looking for a girl who works here—Miranda Tidy. Is she on duty?'

'Oh yes, Miranda. She's not here.'

'When can I find her here?'

'She doesn't work at the Club any more.' The woman looked at him curiously, with veiled amusement.

'Anything wrong?'

'Why should there be?'

'Where can I reach her?'

'I don't know.'

'I'm a friend of hers, and I'd like you to give me her address.'

'I don't have her address, sir. And in any event I wouldn't be able to reveal it without her permission.'

'Now listen——'

'We get many inquiries from men for addresses, sir. Experience shows that many of these are unwelcome. I'm sorry.'

The woman had said her last word. She was immovable. She wouldn't even have smiled for a ten spot.

'You win,' Macy said, and headed for the door.

As he came out through the swing doors, two of the bruisers were dusting off their hands and guffawing at each other as they passed him, going inside.

They had tossed a man over the line of wrought iron stands with geranium pots, into the road. He was crumpled up, between two parked cars.

Steve Macy saw the man, and looked back at the bruisers.

'Better leave him alone, mate,' one of them said. 'Let him sleep it off.'

Macy stepped over the flower pots and took the man by the shoulder. In the light from the entrance he could see a handsomely chiselled, young face and a mop of untidy dark hair. He reeked of whisky. The filthy suit was a good one.

'You okay? Stand up, try to get up,' he said.

'Yesh ... Mmmokay.'

Macy pulled the man up and left him leaning against a car while he stopped a cab. He helped the man inside.

'What's your address?' Macy asked. 'I'll tell the driver.'

The man gave a Kensington address, and Macy told the cabbie.

He handed over a pound note: 'For your trouble.'

'Thanks, Guv,' the cabbie said.

'Now lishen to me,' the passenger said, leaning forward. 'I can pay my own fare—I'm a millionaire, you shee, a millionaire by a mile——'

'Too late,' the cabbie said. 'The gent's already paid for it and more,' and pulled away.

Macy looked down before he moved. Something gleamed near the toe of his shoe. He picked the object up. It was a cheap plastic billfold.

Inside, save for a few tickets, there was only a card inscribed with the name 'Robert J. Forrest'.

43

Ten o'clock. The headlights of Richard West's Ferrari picked up the overhanging trees of the country lane and then hurled them back behind the car, into the darkness.

The fast drive brought back his energy and concentration. He swung the car through a series of snake-like bends, howling in low gear.

He had driven through the gates of Priory Place and half way up the drive before he realized the house was in darkness. Nobody had been home when he telephoned earlier. It was odd, but perhaps they were at the back of the house.

West ignored the wide garage to one side of the building and turned the Ferrari under the pillared portico at the front entrance.

He peeled off his driving gloves as he let himself in. Silence. Darkness, and an odd, empty feeling.

He switched the lights on in the main reception rooms.

'Deirdre! ... Boys!'

One or two small things seemed to have disappeared from the lounge: a clock, a valuable vase, a Dufy. Burglary? Violence to the children...?

He ran upstairs. The first room was the au pair's. It was not only empty—her clothes gone from the wardrobe—but the bed was stripped.

He entered the boys' room with sick horror. It was almost a relief to find they weren't there. Some of their clothes had gone, but the rest of the room seemed to be in order.

The suite he shared with Deirdre: nothing had been touched in his own room, but in her room, the white whorehouse, half of her clothes were missing.

Then he saw the note on her bureau.

Dear Richard,

I realize this is a time of trouble for you, and we have not seen each other enough recently for me to be able to talk over with you the plans I have had to make. Inevitably, you will be surprised and hurt. I do not think you should be. When you have an opportunity to reflect, I believe you will realize I am doing the best thing. You have neither the mood nor the time for us to discuss our feelings and wishes face to face—at this time. And yet I must act.

I am taking the children to Geneva for a short holiday. We shall stay at the Metropole, and I suggest you ring the children there. I shall let you know any change of address. My solicitors will write to you about a divorce, the sale of the house and disposal of furniture.

Keep trying,
Deirdre

He wandered through the big, empty house in a haze. It was the loneliest night of his life. He took a bottle of sleeping pills from the bathroom cabinet and half-filled a glass of water. He poured three into the palm of his hand. He shook the remaining ten or a dozen in the bottle, still holding his palm open. Enough there to send him to oblivion.

Then he put the bottle back in the cabinet, and fired the

three pills into his mouth. He would fight tomorrow.

Eleven o'clock. The lights at Bender, Harwood & Co. were still burning, but very few people were present.

Old Broad Street was nearly deserted. The Rolls-Royce waited at the foot of the steps fronting Bender, Harwood's offices. The chauffeur had cast aside the *Evening Standard* with its shouting headline, read from cover to cover. He dozed.

Inside, the insistent tick, tack, tick of the secretary's typewriter penetrated the vacant suite of offices.

The secretary answered a buzz from her boss, found a file in the cabinet and trotted into his room.

Everard Harwood was still very much in attendance. The desk was spread with pieces of paper arranged in orderly columns. Harwood stood over his handiwork like a general with his campaign map.

'A market is never dead, you know,' he said to his secretary, taking the file from her. 'There's always somebody willing to come in. Always.'

Harwood lived on the gambling instinct of others.

He worked on the telephone. He knew where to call—the clubs and the restaurants—even at eleven at night. His conversations were terse and persuasive. He jotted the results down on a pad, dictating intermittently.

'I'll tell you what I'll do my friend—yes, I'll take them—half a million at 50—yes, the lot—I think I can find somebody—of course they'll go lower——'

'I don't see how they can fail to go up—I recommend it—a quarter million—at 17?—no?—they must go over 17—all right, 15—a quarter million at 15—you must, you must make a fortune——'

'I can get you a hundred thousand Libra at 17—magnificent buying—they must go up——'

'My dear chap, I'd like to take all you've got—but you know how hard they are going to be to place—might take a flyer for a client at say 8—positively not—not a penny more—impossible—good—you will?—I think 8 is an eminently fair price after today's fiasco—done——'

'After today's fiasco, dear fellow, I'd say 15 was a fair price—I can—I can get you two hundred thousand at 15—fine—done—you'll never regret it——'

'Call from Zurich on the line, Mr Harwood,' his secretary interrupted on the intercom.

'Who is it?'

'Rhonheimer.'

Harwood relaxed in his chair in pleasant anticipation. 'Put him through.'

'You want to come back, Kurt?—of course—a disaster—but Libra has plenty of assets—whatever happens—yes—well I haven't seen a buying price cheaper than 17—I think I can—as many as I can?—at 17?—OK—the Cobral account—certainly——'

He rearranged the papers finally on his desk and dictated some final notes.

'I think that's all for today,' he said to the girl. He chuckled. 'It doesn't take much for a penny share to improve. That's what brings them in—visions of a hundred, two hundred, three hundred per cent profit overnight.'

'I thought Libra was suspended from further sales,' the girl said.

'So it is, so it is. But these are private transactions, you understand? Private.'

Harwood dismissed the girl with slight irritation. She was a shade too smart. But no matter. He was doing precisely what everyone else did. One couldn't stop a market by making a rule. The market was there because men had these visions of profit....

He opened the door of his private closet and gave himself a final grooming. He smoothed the lines round his eyes, applied a dab of skin perfume to his cheeks.

Everard Harwood was satisfied with his appearance. He closed the closet and slipped into his velvet-collared overcoat. He touched the intercom button:

'Is the car here?' he asked. 'I'm ready to go home now.'

Eleven o'clock. Steve Macy had been late in arriving at Bryanston Square, and instead of going out to dinner as

they'd planned, Linda served steak and salad.

To Macy this was infinitely better than any restaurant.

Linda was unusually silent, with dark circles round her eyes as though she had been crying.

When he had lit her cigarette and his own over coffee, he dared to ask her.

'It was all the things that happened today, I suppose. I did cry before you came. Silly. I can't remember when I did that last,' she said.

'Do you good,' he said.

'The share price collapsing like that—and the uncertainty at the office—nobody knows what's happening—even the senior managers don't know.'

Her serious dark eyes melted him.

'Libra's in a very bad way, isn't it?'

'I've been trying to tell you.'

'How long will—how long will it last?'

'A day, a week, a month, two at the outside.'

'But why, Steve, *why*? It's such a fine, efficient company, with good staff and management. Why?'

'Because Harry Beech and his friends have expanded it far beyond its strength, and milked it dry for their own personal profit.'

'I can't believe it. I can't believe that a man like Harry would. . . .'

'Can I ask this? About Harry. Is he still around?'

'No.'

'Do you care?'

She paused and looked straight at him.

'A little,' she said.

It hurt him; made him feel vaguely ill in his guts. He spoke softly: 'Did you want to—to capture him?'

Her eyes were unfocused.

'Nobody could,' she said.

'The man's influence is everywhere,' he said ruefully. 'It seeps into every fissure, like a poisonous gas.'

'Steve: I don't want to hear you speak against him.'

'You're right. I don't have to.'

Again he met her strong, unblinking stare.

'I've cared more for you than for him or anyone else,' she said.

'Cared?' he asked.

'You were too strong a medicine for me, Steve.'

'It's different now. I'm divorced. I'm free. Respectable. We could marry if you ever got round to agreeing.'

'Once I thought you were the greatest man alive. It would take time.'

'You've nobody here but your parents. They don't need you at the moment. Come to New York. Give it a try.'

'Do you think I'd find something?'

'Cooking my breakfast would be something.'

'No.'

'Doing my washing then?'

'I don't want to.'

'Darning my socks, at least.'

'You throw them away and get new ones.'

'What's in this for me?' he asked.

'Seriously, Steve, would you want it that way?'

'Not if you don't. I'll stay home and do the dishes.'

She ignored his flippancy.

'Do you want children?' she asked.

'No.'

'No. You already have one. I don't.'

'Linda, if you really wanted a child——'

'I want a willing father. I might ask, what's in this for me?'

'My superb company every night of the week.'

'Except when you're on business trips and having drinks with the boys.'

'I'll never touch another drop.'

'It's no good, Steve. It won't work. I don't want to be a domestic appliance.'

'Not even one that gets taken to the films and the theatre?'

'Not even one of those.'

She wasn't going to respond to his jokes. And he knew the subject was deadly serious. He wasn't a knight in shining armour, and she wasn't a princess.

'If I can't have children,' she said, 'or if I don't have them, why should I give up my job? I want to realize myself——'

'You won't have this job much longer.'

He watched the pattern of emotions cross her usually smooth, unemotional features, as the foundations of her world shuddered. This slight, shapely, dark-haired woman, who looked years younger than her late thirties, had thrust herself into the top rank of Libra executives by her sheer intensity.

Now it was threatened.

She paused for perhaps thirty seconds. Then she said: 'In a way, you're responsible.'

He knew she wasn't blaming him. She was touching on an old crisis for which he was also, at least partly, responsible.

They had met in New York. He was a senior legal adviser attached to the head office, which was in New York in those days. He remembered the events perfectly. He was separated from his wife, and miserable. His friend Mark Wright, a legal adviser in the same department was always counselling:

'What you need, Steve my boy, is a woman. A therapeutic treatment from a nice, kind woman——'

'I don't know any woman I want to go out with. They're all dogs.'

'Leave it to me: Janie knows a superb little English girl in Personnel. She's just been transferred here from London. No friends. Lonely. And a looker. You two might be good for each other. . . .'

That was how it happened. They met on a blind date that wasn't really so blind, at Mark's apartment. Drinks, a film, supper.

And bed. There was never the slightest doubt that they would make love. From the first moment of introduction, when he took hold of her small hand and didn't let it go as quickly as he should, there was a physical rapport between them.

When the affair was eventually over, he was astonished to count back and find that it had only lasted a few months. They were months of furious passion. The trimmings—the drinks, the dinners, the shows, soon lost their place:

'I don't want us to be seen around too much together, Steve. You're married——'

'But what does it matter?'

'I hate people talking.'

'I don't care a damn.'

'If you want to go out with me on your terms, go away and come back when you've tidied your life up.'

That was Linda. He didn't go away.

'I'd prefer that the people at the office didn't know about us, Steve.'

'But why? Some already know. Mark and Janie.'

'Then play it cooler. Tell them it's off. I don't want anything to spoil my chances of promotion.'

'I'm afraid I don't follow that, Linda.'

But he did it her way. Their relationship became nocturnal. Almost secret. She relented occasionally and they went out in a party with friends, but essentially he saw her only at her apartment. The whole of their relationship became the act of physical love, the most vigorous he had ever experienced.

He had been exhausted and exhilarated by her and scarcely able to count the days. When at last she went to Europe on business, he had been bitterly jealous.

'I want to finish it, Steve,' she said when she returned. 'I don't think we have a future.'

She was the kind of single minded woman who could make decisions like that. He forced her that night, although he was only a pathetic shadow without her encouragement.

When she told him months afterwards of her pregnancy, he was almost glad. He had wanted to hurt her for not wanting him, for not caring enough. The abortion certainly hurt her.

So he had been concerned in two crises in her life—that one, which had also been a crisis in his own, and this.

She leaned over towards him on the couch and undid a couple of buttons on his shirt. A diamond of tanned flesh appeared. She kissed it.

'I could love you,' she said.

She stood up and let her gown slide off her shoulders to the floor. She had rounded hips, a flat belly, and small, firmly pointed breasts. Apart from the dark beard of her groin, her figure was childish.

She sat beside him and loosened his belt. He co-operated as she slipped off his clothes. She worked methodically, without

any trace of self-consciousness. It was as though she had always possessed him.

He was cold and inert, his insides churned up.

'What's the matter?' she asked.

'I don't know. I suppose it's such a mess that I can't sort out my own feelings.'

He let her kiss and fondle him. He watched her dexterously working on his body with her hands and lips as though he was seeing her from the body of someone else. For a long time he could feel nothing except the actuality of her touch.

He let his head rest back on the couch and closed his eyes. She persisted with her efforts. Eventually, her touch began to generate tiny threads of electric current, darting under his skin. The electric impulses became more and more profuse and stronger....

He opened his eyes and she looked at him proudly.

'You seem to be all right now,' she said, and threw one leg over him and they clutched together, searing, burning as they had in the past....

44

Richard West felt a mild degree of contempt for the man who faced him across his desk. The man's face exuded an oily sweat.

'Honestly, Richard, I don't think either you or Harry realize how far you've pushed it——'

'Don't blame me or Harry for what you've done yourself. You're the Chairman of the Libra Pension Fund, not me!'

'But Richard, you know that you and Harry always——'

Richard West watched the man deflate with anxiety; he allowed no relief: 'You made a series of commercial loans on your own judgment.'

'And the ones that are due haven't been repaid. The interest on most of them is overdue.'

'Listen, Cliff, I have enough problems without helping you to do your job. If loans haven't been repaid, you'd better collect them, or realize your security.'

'Security!' the Chairman said. 'Worthless paper.'

'I called you here to see if you could help me by granting a further loan to a third party, not to hear all your troubles—and be blamed for them.'

'If you didn't realize it, I'm telling you now,' the Chairman said: 'We barely have sufficient in the fund to cover current costs and outgoings. We have no liquidity at all, and you know as well as I do that the people we have loaned to are tied up directly or indirectly with Libra. That's why I was horrified at yesterday's débâcle on the stock market.'

'You should have thought of that when you made the loans.'

'When *I* made the loans?'

'You and your committee.'

The Chairman's colour heightened and some of the abjectness went out of him.

'Oh, come on now, Richard. Everything I've done on the big loans to Libra Life and Scottish Libra Assurance has been done because you and Harry wanted it.'

West dug his teeth into the butt of the cigar. 'Hard times are coming, Cliff. Nobody is going to hold your hand.'

The Chairman stood up. He'd always been a cipher. Convincing enough if you didn't listen too closely. A well dressed, and very well paid cipher.

'I forget how you got the job, Cliff. You're somebody's cousin, aren't you?'

Cliff Billing took a step closer to the desk and waved a long finger at West, his mouth working noiselessly at first.

'Libra's Pension Fund is nearly broke, Richard. Can you conceive what that means to tens of thousands of employees?'

'They'll want your hide,' Richard West said.

'Yes! And before they get mine, I'll feed them yours! Yours and Harry Beech's!'

'Get out!'

Cliff Billing slammed out through the door.

West got up from his desk and went to the window. So there was no hope of a stop-gap loan from the Pension Fund. No Eurodollar loan. No instalment from First Bankers. And their overdraft climbing at tens of thousands a day.

He looked out the window at the sky, the sunlight on the old buildings. Maybe it would be better to be one of those pigeons

snoozing on the parapet of the building opposite.

The door snicked behind him and he heard Corinne Drake's official voice.

'There was something that might interest you on the twelve o'clock news.'

'What?' he asked without turning round.

'A question has been asked in Parliament about the share collapse and the announcement by Mr Poynton.'

'What sort of a question?'

'Whether the Department of Industry will investigate, because Mr Poynton's statement was said to be calculated to deceive.'

'Sounds bad.'

'Yes.'

'For Poynton.'

Richard West gave a short, harsh laugh.

The door clicked behind him and he was left alone.

Steve Macy was awakened in his room at the Connaught Hotel by the arrival of a messenger. It was just past noon. He was thick with sleep after the night with Linda.

The messenger brought a brown paper package. Macy got up reluctantly, put on his dressing gown and went through to the reception room. He split the parcel open: three copies of a thin volume of typescript headed, 'Report on the Libra Organization by Steven Macy'.

There it all was: the result of his jottings in three countries —every interview, every discovery, all neatly listed and referenced. Enough information to put Harry Beech, Richard West, Challis and Cooper behind bars. *And* it was only the tip of the iceberg. There must be more, and worse. The hotel typing service had turned his scrawl into a neat professional indictment.

But there was more to add. He left the volumes in a chair and showered. He dressed hurriedly, gulped a pair of fried eggs and orange juice brought by the room service, and took a cab to Libra Towers in Pall Mall.

'Af'noon, Mr Macy,' Ernie Tidy said. 'Got you on my list for the big meetin'.'

The Chief Messenger lumbered forward from his two more junior colleagues, resplendent in a navy blue uniform with a white belt, and a white-peaked hat.

'Hi, Ernie. Are you going to lead the band?'

'This is my official uniform,' Ernie said peevishly.

'How's Miranda?'

'She ain't so good, Mr Macy. I'll tell you about it sometime—would you go up to the penthouse floor, to Miss Drake?'

'Sure,' Macy said, heading for the lift. He'd find out about Miranda later.

Then the old man closed in with him out of earshot of the other messengers. 'What's happenin', Mr Macy?' he asked. He looked pained, apprehensive. He was one of thousands.

Steve Macy reflected for a moment. 'I can't tell you now. I don't even know myself.' He hit the button of the automatic lift.

Corrine Drake showed him into the Boardroom. The rest of the First Bankers team—Ullman, Prescott, and Klein—were already there. Prescott remained a pale shadow of his former self. He seemed content to let Ullman do all the talking.

Macy was early and he could watch the rest arrive. Two groups came in together, each of two men. One pair represented the bankers, the other a European finance house which had lent a lot to Libra.

He was introduced to Charles Flackman, head of the firm of auditors responsible for the Libra books. Their Anglo-Saxon name of Royston's cloaked the persona of their founding partner. Charles Flackman was Polish, or rather he had been until persistent elocution lessons had given him a near-perfect BBC accent.

A whole bevy of lawyers arrived. He couldn't follow whose was whose. There were Libra lawyers, bank lawyers, lawyers for the auditors and so on. They joked out loud amongst each other and zestfully prepared to do a job they were going to enjoy.

At last Richard West's people came in, led by him: Challis, Cooper, the elegant Dasilva, and another man, small, round, bald, dressed in black, with black horn-rimmed spectacles, and heavy black sideburns.

Richard West was groomed and composed. He took up an

easy stance at the head of the huge table while everybody else was seated. His eyes flashed round to obtain control. The room quieted.

'Gentlemen,' he said, 'I'd like to introduce Bernard Polk to those of you who don't already know him, or know of him. Mr Polk has been appointed as receiver for the bank and the European financiers under their debentures, and from here on Libra will be run by him. I'm sure the interests of Libra and its creditors couldn't rest in more experienced hands, and I'd like to assure the meeting of my complete co-operation with Mr Polk in straightening Libra out.'

Mr Polk merely huddled down in his chair, exposing more of the expanse of bald head, as the table murmured approval.

Macy saw Challis nudge West.

'Oh there is one thing I'd like to mention before I hand over to Mr Polk,' West said. 'Harry Beech isn't able to be here today. He's at present in Zurich completing negotiations for a Eurodollar loan which I hope will end all our troubles. I'd like to present his apologies, but I think you can appreciate that only something vital could have kept him away.'

Macy lit a cigarette and blew out a long jet of smoke in disgust. So the star turn wouldn't be appearing.

Bernard Polk didn't deign to stand up, but his voice, full, warm and confident, filled the room, issuing from under the gleaming skull, in the region of a closely held file of papers.

'I have received great help from Mr West, his staff and the members of the Board, and I'm able to give a preliminary report today. Let me say first, that in Libra we have a great enterprise and one worth saving. I'm sure it can be done, but not without drastic sacrifices.'

'You can't go on trading, can you?' Ullman asked.

'That's a decision we ought to take today,' Polk said, opening more of his files and peering at them. 'I believe that with a few economies, the present rate of loss, something in the vicinity of a quarter-million dollars a day, can be cured. In addition there's two hundred million dollars' worth of loans immediately due, and about fifty millions' worth of unsecured debts due; but there are substantial assets....'

'Libra's eating money,' Ullman said.

'Somebody else's money,' Macy said, and drew a pleasant smile from the financiers.

'The tentative proposal,' Polk went on, 'is for certain Libra interests to be sold off——'

'A judicious pruning,' Flackman said.

'Right,' Ullman said. 'We're prepared to make an offer for the Hong Kong and United States interests in a figure which takes into account the fifteen million dollars we've already put in.'

Murmurs of approval.

'What about the cooked books?' Macy asked.

'The what?' Bernard Polk replied, almost revealing his eyes behind the black bar of his spectacles as he brought his head up in Macy's direction for the first time.

'The fraudulent books. The assets that don't exist. The intercompany transactions?'

'That's denied!' West cut in heavily.

'Absolutely,' Challis said, smiling sardonically. 'My dear Mr Macy, what we're trying to do here is to sort things out fairly, and wild allegations of this kind don't help much, do they?'

An unpleasant silence. A movement of chairs. Steve Macy could feel the tide running against him. He turned to Flackman:

'You know, don't you, that there are vast discrepancies on the books, as a result of your firm's failure to audit with care——'

Flackman too could feel the tide. He tucked his silk handkerchief in his breast pocket. 'I certainly know of no discrepancies,' he replied with a quiet chuckle, 'and if there were any, I'm sure there would be a sensible explanation.'

'There would: fraud, dishonesty,' Macy said.

'Come now, Mr Macy,' Polk said; 'Mr Beech and his associates are in a mess, but as for dishonesty——'

'If I'm right,' Macy said, 'how far has the rot gone? Who, in this room, except perhaps Mr West and Mr Challis, knows the full implications of Libra's affairs?'

'I must protest against this line of discussion,' Richard West said suavely.

The feeling of the meeting was more strongly against him now, but despite the embarrassed glances that were thrown in his direction, Steve Macy pressed on:

'Libra's broke. Thousands of small investors have lost their money. Apart from the money owed to people at this meeting, Mr Polk has said there's another fifty million dollars. That represents thousands of small traders who aren't going to get their bills paid. Let's face it: what we're here for today is to see who can tear the best strip of flesh off the corpse——'

'Do you have any objection to your employers being paid, Mr Macy?' Charles Flackman asked, amid laughter.

Klein reached over and took Macy's elbow. 'Better lay off, Steve——'

'Libra ought to be liquidated and investigated,' Macy said.

Bernard Polk fingered the rim of his spectacles. 'That would fetter disposal of the assets.'

Ullman, who was sitting on one side of Macy bent close to his ear. 'Don't queer my deal, Macy. This isn't a crusade. I want to pull out of the mess with some of our fifteen million, and I don't care who tells lies if I can get it.'

45

The bankers, brokers, financiers, shareholders and traders were bemoaning their losses, or scurrying about making deals long before the newspapers carried the headlines 'Questions in Parliament about Libra', 'Will Libra Crash?', 'Grave Financial Trouble for City Giant'. Everard Harwood had time to reckon up and congratulate himself on the advantages of bear markets.

The rumours, the newspaper reports which asked all the questions but could give no answers, brought fear and insecurity to a man who had sat in the same chair at Libra for ten years, and who worried over his next pay increase and the rising cost of butter; and the same fear and insecurity spread amongst the thousands of people who energized the Libra machine all over the world, every day and every night, and without whom the machine amounted to nothing more than scrap metal, glass, plastic and old rubber tyres.

Every day, and night, Harry Beech's subjects converged on factories in England, Canada, Holland and the United States; they converged on offices and warehouses to press buttons, dial telephones, open doors, draw plans, carry parcels, write letters; they adjusted throttles, filed papers, wielded electric drills, pushed and pulled, lectured and were lectured to, and chattered to their workmates. They were Harry Beech's subjects. In return for work, he gave them money and sick pay and a pension. And he gave them a sense that they were useful.

The people of Beech's domains and territories were as varied as the population of any kingdom; there were dapper, salaried executives with degrees from Oxford or Harvard and the ageing Spanish waiters of the Beech Hotels with their numerous young children. Between these extremes, a legion: pretty girl clerks hoping to become air hostesses, barge captains, porters, cooks, carpenters, property surveyors, accountants, lawyers, secretaries, copy typists, computer operators; bright kids with good university records: kids who never went to university moving packages in warehouses, married women helping their husbands make out, birds doing as little as possible between hairsets, men like George Bennett who'd sat in the same chair for ten years, and others whose feet had gone from rubber tiles to thick carpet in half that time. Mothers, fathers, pregnant and sterile, all ages, all healths, all colours and creeds, all bound together by a regular cheque from Libra.

Thursday was a day like any other working day at Libra Towers in Pall Mall. It was midsummer. The air was humid, overcast, with a thin mist.

George Bennett arose that morning, keeping his worries to himself, as he usually did. He maintained the same desultory conversation with his wife over breakfast as usual, and read the morning paper. He consulted his horoscope and learned of the pleasing prospect of good fortune. He didn't believe it, but everything helped.

He picked up his library book in the hall on his way out of the house, took the same underground train, and noted with reassurance the familiar state of Pall Mall as he approached

the Towers. The window boxes were full of red and purple flowers. As he went in he heard the office machinery starting to click, and the phones were buzzing. The building had a comfortable paperish smell.

He took possession of the chair behind his drawing board and the view outside the window: lawns with massive old oak trees in full summer leaf.

His colleagues settled round him in the room. Work began. His pencil began to trace an intricate design. He was absorbed.

At eleven he stopped to drink a cup of coffee and saw Ernie Tidy, the messenger, come into the room and speak to the supervisor. They were too far away for him to hear anything. The supervisor was frowning and shaking his head, and Tidy was insisting.

Then, as Bennett knew he would, Tidy lumbered down the aisle of drawing boards towards him, looking as though he was on parade in his fatuous uniform.

''Lo, George,' Ernie Tidy said.

'Ernie,' George Bennett replied quietly.

Tidy came very close, and glanced round suspiciously to see if anyone was looking or listening.

'Looks pretty bad, don't it?' he said.

'What brought you over here, Ernie?'

The question sobered Ernie's managerial reflections.

'Now that's somethin' agin,' he replied. 'I gotta get round a lot o' departments this mornin'. It's the meeting, in the hall, at twelve,' he said darkly.

'A meeting in the hall? You mean everybody'll be there, all the staff?'

'Yep.'

'What's it—about?'

'I dunno—but I can guess,' Tidy croaked knowingly.

'You mean ...?'

'I mean it's the sack. The finish.'

It was difficult to grasp the meaning. 'No—surely——'

'Wait and see, George,' Ernie Tidy said, with the sure cynicism of a man of the streets, as he lumbered off.

George Bennett assured himself that Tidy was an ignorant old messenger who couldn't possibly know about anything so

momentous. Sure, there might be changes, economies in Libra as a result of present troubles, but they were unlikely to touch a long-service man like him.

The supervisor announced the meeting, and five minutes before the appointed time the men of the drawing office began to rise from their seats and drift out of the door in twos and threes. George Bennett went too, not talking to anybody, seeing that his friends were not talking much either. The news, whatever it was, couldn't be good news.

George Bennett joined a stream of others moving from other rooms into the corridors, and the dense, unhurried stream, moved in the direction of the hall. 'Could be they want to tell us not to worry, and to keep working and all that——' Bennett heard.

He found all the several hundred seats of the hall filled by earlier comers. He couldn't remember ever having seen the whole staff assembled at one time. They were sitting quiescently, standing in the aisles and round the walls. He was soon blocked in one of the aisles by dozens of bodies. Calm. Talking about work. About play. About children. That business on the stock exchange: what did it mean?

Libra was very solid *there* all round him, Libra Towers, the people, work to do.

'General Manager's going to speak.'

'No, the Union bosses.'

'Yeah. The Unions.'

Twelve noon came and passed by a minute. Three minutes. The stage was empty.

Clouds of cigarette smoke rose from the audience. One or two loud jokes produced a weak titter.

There was a sudden stirring round him, and Bennett too could see them coming. He could see through the glass doors and along the passage. A serious-faced official group: the general manager, his assistant, the new operations manager, and two important-looking young lieutenants, plump with satin ties.

The officials entered the hall quickly and gained the stage. All except the general manager fell back to the rear in a line. The general manager fingered the microphone, adjusting

it for height. He looked down at his notes, his voice firmly feeling out against the walls for volume.

'I am going to come straight to the point with you this morning ...' he said. 'It is a great shock to me to have to speak to you in these circumstances ... but I have no alternative ... and I want you to know, before it is known publicly, because here at Libra we have always taken a pride in treating our staff like members of a team, one team with management——'

'Get on with it!' a gravelly voice shouted.

The general manager's mouth contracted, emptying itself of rolling phrases.

'Libra will be closing down today. There will be no more work, for most of you, but——'

The general manager's fruity, amplified voice reached everybody.

But for a collective gasp of indrawn breath, there was a moment's silence in the hall.

The fidgeting and coughing stopped as though the audience had turned to stone.

An echo came from another voice: 'No more work?'

'None,' the general manager said, and by sheer force of habit added, 'I'm sorry....'

'I'm very sorry too ...' somebody started, but the words were drowned in a rising uproar.

No more work. No more work. The ugly words at last burned themselves into George Bennett's consciousness. He was tossed helplessly in a stream of humanity. Fists were raised. Jaws opened and showed ugly teeth. Ears and cheeks reddened, hair tossed....

Then the anger and astonishment drained away as quickly as it had come.

'Shut up! 'E's still speakin' '

'... you can go home. You will be paid to date....'

'What about *your* pay?'

'Yeah!'

'What about our pensions?'

'Pensions of course are a different matter ... the Pension Fund is quite separate....'

The dapper, red faced general manager turned to his aides and they gave mute signs of approval.

'Libra is now under the control of a receiver,' he went on. 'The receiver will be carrying on parts of the business, especially overseas, and there will be a small watchdog staff kept on here, and perhaps others to clean up: but this will not apply to very many of you. The receiver may decide to revive other parts of the business later . . . and if so, I hope you will be in a position to accept employment then——'

'Bloody cheek!' somebody shouted.

The GM's lieutenants closed round him in the rising uproar, and they marched off the stage like a troop of soldiers.

Near the door, the crowd jostled the official group. The general manager slipped through the swing doors leaving one of his fat-necked young hatchet-men to wrestle with the protesters.

George Bennett was pushed and shoved out of the hall into a corridor clogged with knots of people holding forth to each other on what they could do. He had no fury, no anger, only despair. He drifted past the different spokesmen, confused.

He ran the palms of his hands along the edge of his drawing board. It was there, unmistakably, bearing the half-finished tracing of a cargo loading bay for the new terminal at De Gaulle Airport, Paris. He held a pair of stainless steel dividers between his fingers: a balanced, precision-made instrument, a useful instrument.

He opened the drawer of his desk and laid the dividers in a velvet lined instrument case. There were his carefully prepared and graded pens and pencils, and half a chocolate bar. He ate the rest of the bar.

The sudden sweetness was a relief. He put the instrument case, a file of personal accounts, and two old paperbacks into his valise. He was ready.

His colleagues were packing up. Some of them had gone. The big, light room had a forlorn look. The way it looked on Saturday afternoons when it was going to stand untouched over the weekend. But this weekend was going to be longer. . . .

46

Anthony Poynton was confronted by the porter at the door of the Grafton Club and instantly identified as one who was not a member.

Poynton was in no mood to parley with porters. He pushed the man aside and strode into the foyer of the club. As he passed under the gilded cherubs who cavorted on the ceiling, and by the very fine Delacroix which graced the wall, he was pursued by the barking voice.

'Beg pardon, sir—Can't go in there without an appointment, sir——'

He mopped his brow with a handkerchief and entered the lounge. On a couch in the far corner, Challis and West were conferring. He bore down on them.

They looked up suddenly, when he was nearly to them, and showed not a flicker of emotion.

'I want a word with you two,' Poynton said.

'By all means, Tony. Have a seat,' Richard West replied warmly.

'Not the best place to talk business, I must say,' Challis remarked mildly, looking round the room.

Some of the old denizens of the room, apparently huddled over coffee or ensconced behind a newspaper, were peeping out. After all, their connection with Libra was well known, and Libra was the news of the day.

'You want a secret meeting?' Poynton said. 'Another secret?'

'I'm not sure we need to meet at all, Tony,' West replied.

'No. I'm sure there isn't as far as you're concerned; but what about me?'

'What about you, Tony?' Richard West asked.

'How can you possibly ask that? I was on the point of getting a junior Ministry, and now——'

'We all have storms to weather,' Challis said.

'You used me,' Poynton said.

'You're a director of Libra. You didn't protest.' West studied

the politician and noted the signs of distress: the tired, sallow skin, the rough shave.

'You used me to make that announcement, when you must have known——'

'Tony, it was a very useful announcement,' West said.

'Indeed it was!' added Challis.

'You knew the company was bankrupt, and you used me to try to hold the share price up.'

'We knew nothing of the sort,' West said emphatically.

'Can you understand? All my credibility has gone.'

'That's too bad,' West said.

'I don't know how much money you've lost on that phoney account you set up for me——'

'*You've* lost,' Challis said.

'I don't care about the money——'

'Why worry then?' West asked.

'You've taken my reputation from me.'

Challis and West glanced at each other as though it was an almost unknown word.

'You wanted the rewards, Tony,' West said, 'and you have to take the consequences.'

'I had a lot of public service ahead of me, a lot.'

The fat man crumpled miserably in the chair.

'Both Challis and I have suffered heavy losses, Tony. Our reputations are tied up with Libra too——'

'You'll let it be known that I was only superficially involved, won't you?'

'You're a Libra director. As such, I don't need to tell you you had a duty to ensure what you were saying was correct,' West said.

'I relied on you. You know that!' Poynton said, his deep eyes imploring them.

'That's really too bad,' West said.

'Calculated to deceive! That's what was said in the Commons about my statement.'

'Some extraordinary things are said in the Commons,' Challis yawned.

'I may be prosecuted——'

'It's possible,' West said.

'And when they find out I had a lot of shares——'

The discreet gentlemen of the Grafton took care not to make their interest in the trio in the corner particularly noticeable. At that hour there would normally have been a half a dozen members in the room, but today, for some unknown reason, the lounge began to fill up. The billiard room was empty. The dining room was clear already. It seemed that everyone wanted to smoke and have a brandy.

'I think we'd better go,' Richard West said, looking around.

'Yes, I have an appointment,' Challis said.

The two rose and sauntered towards the door. The way between the tables and couches was sufficiently wide for them to be abreast, leaving Poynton trailing behind.

'I want to get an understanding with you——' he said.

Neither Challis nor West turned. West raised a forefinger to the porter in the foyer. The porter, an expert in signs, went out and called the doorman, and the doorman's liveried arms made a semaphore signal down the street.

By the time they were outside the doors, the Rolls-Royce was waiting at the kerb.

'We have to talk——'

The doorman held open the rear door and Challis entered.

'West, I want you to explain——'

'Not now, Tony.'

'Excuse me, sir,' the doorman said, quick to sense the unwanted. He barred Poynton with his forearm, clearing the way for West to enter.

'I—I must——'

'Later, Tony,' West said blandly as he slipped into the car.

The door snicked shut. Challis and West settled comfortably, obscured by the tinted windows. The doorman guarded the door until the Rolls had drawn away.

Anthony Poynton was alone in the street. The doorman, resplendent in pink livery and a top hat, gave him the contemptuous stare reserved for beggars.

Anthony Poynton moved along Grafton Street, seeing nothing. A fat, untidy, balding little man, more than half dead with shame.

* * *

The sun was up and shining full into the wide windows of Linda Hall's bedroom when Steve Macy awoke. The curtains were billowing out in the breeze and he could hear the thick rustle of the trees in the Square, like paper money.

He was late.

Linda was uncovered, lying on her belly, naked. Her face was towards him, but she was staring at the wall.

'Meditating?'

'I was thinking ... no more work. I don't have a job any more.'

'You're coming back to New York with me. Right?'

'Right ... I can't believe it's all gone, Steve.'

'Oh, they'll be putting bits of it together again. Libra, I mean. Getting it working. That's what we're arguing about now. And I'm late. I should have been down to Libra Towers half an hour ago.'

'I don't suppose I should even be in this apartment.'

'You don't need it any more ... look, I'll make breakfast while you meditate. I don't need to get down to the Towers all that promptly.'

'I thought you were an indispensable guy.'

'I'm a dummy. I was told to sit tight and shut up yesterday.'

'Why?'

'Because all the big boys are getting in for their cut, making deals with Libra and to hell with anyone else that might happen to be owed money—to hell with the shareholders, the employees.'

'Steve, they can't do that!'

'I tell you they *are* doing it. They can't if Libra is liquidated. Then the smash is examined officially and everybody looked after. But the big lenders will fight liquidation. They can afford to. They'll plunder Libra. They have valid documents that practically entitle them to circumcise the members of the Board if they want to.'

'I don't understand it.'

'You're not the only one. If it comes out that there's been any dishonesty in running Libra, I should think liquidation would be inevitable——'

'But you know there is, Steve.'

'I know, I know. But I'm a dummy.'

'I can't believe that Harry ...'

'I'll get breakfast,' Steve Macy said.

He went to the kitchen and shortly produced a tray bearing two halves of grapefruit, a pile of toast, marmalade, butter and a pot of coffee.

They sat up in bed with the tray between them.

'My, what a cook you are!'

'Working for our daily crust, doing the cooking——'

'I thought that, but I decided I'd have plenty of time to take over the kitchen.'

'You have got plenty of time,' he said, kissing her.

After breakfast, when they were comfortable and warm in the bright bedroom, they made love again. It was easy and natural, and though it did not take long because their feelings had not quite subsided from the night, it was perfectly timed in its climax.

Steve Macy didn't arrive at the top floor of Libra Towers until nearly eleven.

'Have they been going long?' he asked Miss Drake.

'About an hour. Go right in, Mr Macy.'

He entered the smoke-filled boardroom with its huddle of men round the table. He couldn't immediately see a place next to Ullman and Prescott. The discussion over the table went on so he was hardly noticed. But Klein saw him, and stood up, coming round the table.

'Can I see you outside?' Klein whispered.

'Sure.'

Macy let himself be propelled out of the door.

Klein took him by the elbow and went in the direction of Miss Drake. 'Is there another office we can use, please?' he asked her.

'I think it'll be all right to use Mr West's office while the meeting is on,' she replied, indicating the door.

'What's up, Herb?'

They went inside the room and Klein took any easy chair facing him. Questioning.

'You didn't get the message?' Klein asked.

'What message?'

'Delivered to your hotel this morning. It went round there at eight o'clock, I arranged it.'

'I wasn't at the Connaught last night. What is all this, Herb? What is the message about?'

'I have a copy here, Steve,' he said, taking a photostat from his breast pocket, and passing the document to Macy.

It was a letter, dated yesterday, on the letterhead of First Bankers International, London, addressed to him.

Dear Mr Macy,

I have to thank you for your outstanding service to the corporation and to tell you that as of the date hereof we have no further duties for you. As a token of our special appreciation the sum of $U.S. 100,000 will be transferred to your New York bank account forthwith. All drawings from our accounts at the Bank of America will be entered as non accountable expenses incurred by you in the performance of your duties. The Corporation will meet your hotel bill for one further day. A cheque for £100 sterling for miscellaneous further expenses is enclosed (on a non-accountable basis) together with a first class airline ticket to New York. Your drawing rights on our accounts have been terminated.

It is to be understood between us that the above considerations are offered in full payment of all remuneration and reimbursement due. I think you will agree they represent a generous conclusion to our relationship.

I should like to mention that the Board of the corporation take a very serious view of the duty of confidentiality which is essential to our past relationship. I have no doubt you take an equally serious view.

Once again, with thanks:

Yours very truly,
ORVILLE PRESCOTT
President

Steve Macy looked up from the page at Herbert Klein. Klein appeared to have a very bad toothache.

'I'm sorry, Steve.'

Macy let out a wild laugh. 'I'm fired!'

'Steve, you shot off your mouth——'

'I'm glad I did.'

'You can see what Ullman's trying to do——'

'He's trying to pull that fifteen million dollars out of the fire so he can not only roast Prescott, he can eat him for dinner as well!'

'You might be right, Steve——'

'Neither Prescott nor Ullman gives a damn about the fifteen million. First Bankers can afford it a hundred times over. They just want to kill each other.'

'It doesn't matter so much *why* they want the money back,' Klein said. 'It's their money, Steve, and we're paid to try to get it for them.'

'Not at the expense of other creditors.'

Klein sat back in his chair philosophically. 'I think it's a matter of *what* you can do.'

'I don't. And you know as well as I do, Herb, that the plane business won't be the only swindle. It's the only one we found, but people who get up to those tricks make a proper job of it.'

'Maybe, but parts of Libra are worth having ... that's what we're about getting hold of.'

'And to hell with everyone else.'

'Business is tough.'

'On little guys.'

'I got you into this, Steve, and I feel kinda responsible. You did a great job. Maybe if we'd listened to you, First Bankers wouldn't have got burned. But you're being paid. And how. It's all over.'

'Not if I tell what I know.'

Klein stood up. 'I gotta get back, Steve ... so long....' As he went out the door, Klein looked back over his shoulder with his kindly grin and said softly: 'You're too smart to talk, Steve. First Bankers would sue you blind....'

Steve Macy followed him slowly and stopped in the frame of the open doorway. He leaned against the frame and reread the letter.

'Well I'm screwed!' he said, shaking his head.

'I beg your pardon,' Miss Drake said, from her desk a yard away.

'I beg *your* pardon, Ma'am. I was just fired.'

'Weren't we all?' Corrine Drake replied.

47

Corrine Drake was beginning to push out her gorgeous tits and take an interest when the buzzer on her desk sounded.

'Yes, Mr West, right away,' she said, picking up a notebook and pencil.

She headed for the Boardroom. 'I won't be a minute,' she said to Steve Macy; 'why don't you stick around and we can cry over a cup of coffee?'

'Sure.'

He watched her go. A very voluptuous piece, but his sex-button wasn't working.

He stuffed the letter into his pocket and, as soon as Corinne Drake had gone, went back into West's office. He opened the doors of the desk. Empty. Not a note or paper anywhere.

'What the hell are you doing?'

Richard West stood on the threshold.

'Looking at how you run your business.'

'Find anything interesting?'

'About the same as the Libra bank account, I guess.'

'Miss Drake!' West shouted, without taking his eye off Macy. 'Get Tidy up here immediately!'

'You're going to hand me over to your bruiser?'

'I'm going to have you escorted out of the building. I should hand you over to the police.'

'That's a very good one, I like it. *You* will hand *me* over to the police!'

Richard West passed his hand wearily over his forehead. His hair looked greyer and he was lined with fatigue.

'You're not going to make it, West.'

'We'll see ... It won't be up to you. I believe you've been kicked out.'

'I know a lot.'

'What's the good of knowing a lot?'

'Yes, sir? Hullo, Mr Macy,' Tidy said entering.

'Tidy, take this man downstairs and escort him off the premises. He has no further authority to be in Libra Towers.'

'Yes, sir.'

'See you in jail,' Macy said, as he went out with Tidy, catching a last glimpse of the expression of furtive unease of West who was opening a wall-safe behind his desk-chair.

'Sorry,' Steve Macy said as he passed a startled Corrine Drake. 'I'm in custody.'

'Mind if we slip down the stairs, Mr Macy?' Tidy asked. 'I'd like to see everythin's okay on the landings. Save another trip.'

'Suits me, Ernie. You didn't lose your job, then?'

'Yair, I did, but I got a special temp'ry arrangement like Miss Drake. A week or two, y'know. Somebody's got to look after Libra Towers what knows it, Mr Macy, not like them security guards with their dogs.'

As they walked down the first flight they passed an imposing pair of polished walnut doors.

'What's in there, Ernie?'

'That's private, that is.'

'But what's in there?'

'The penthouse. Mr Beech's own executive suite.'

'Can we go in?'

'Now don't come that one, Mr Macy. You know I got to see you out the front doors. Got specific instructions, I did. Anyway, it's always locked. No staff there now.'

'Do you ever see him—Harry Beech?'

'Na—well, not much—he's in today, though. Bright and early he was. Half past eight this morning.'

'Is he . . .? Tell me, Ernie, why are the doors down from the top floor. I can't understand where the penthouse is.'

''Cos it's out to one side, on two floors on another part of the building.'

'Is that the only entrance?'

'There's the fire escape on the back stairs of the west wing—why you askin' all this? You goin' to break in?'

'Don't be silly, Ernie. I'm curious, that's all.'

Steve Macy went down, flight by flight with Tidy, peering into the empty offices through the glass partitions on each landing.

Libra Towers was empty. The typewriters were covered, and row upon row of them squatted upon the equally neat rows of desks. The table-tops were bare and polished, the cabinets closed. A heavy smell of paper and lino cream gathered in the still air. Somewhere in this deserted warren was Harry Beech.

Macy became bored at the desert of empty offices.

'This here's the Central Personnel Registry,' Tidy said proprietorially, taking him from the next landing into a regiment of filing cabinets, and pulling one open at random.

'Everyone on the permanent staff has his mug on one of these cards, and all his perticlars,' Tidy went on, withdrawing a card and bringing it close to his short-sighted eyes.

'Florence Mary Sefton, aged 23, accounts clerk,' he read and rammed the card back.

'I know the system, Ernie.'

'Yair, you worked for Libra in the old days. Makes ya feel funny, don't it? All them mugs here in the dark when the Towers is empty, and them at home now, permanent like. Just the Towers and drawers full o' mugs. Nuffin else left.'

'And a lot of empty factories, air terminals and God knows what spread all over the globe.'

'Yair. That too,' Ernie said.

They took the lift the rest of the way down, and when they reached the foyer, the telephone was ringing on Tidy's table. He answered it with his back to Macy.

Macy tapped him on the shoulder and mouthed goodbye. Tidy nodded, concentrating on the call.

Instead of letting himself out, Macy went into the ground-floor office and along the corridor to the west wing. The lift was waiting and he took it to the second floor. It didn't matter which floor. Then he went through the wing offices to the back toilets and stairway. Harry Beech's eyrie should be at the top.

He toiled up flight after flight to the top. He should have

taken the lift higher, but it was reassuring to know nobody was about.

At the very top he found a smooth wall on the landing. There was a door all right. He could see the crack. But no handle. No sign of a hinge. It was probably a perfectly legitimate fire door which opened on pressure from the inside.

He went down a flight. Tidy had said the suite was on two floors. Here he was luckier. The fire doors were open. Bits of paper were scattered on the floor, as though the rubbish was removed this way.

Steve Macy entered. He went through an area of toilets and wash handbasins, into a clerks' or typists' office. The desks and chairs had been thrust aside to make a space in the centre of the floor. In the space was a pile of cardboard boxes and three hessian sacks full of paper. Odd place to put the waste paper. It looked as though it was the last instalment of a larger load.

He riffled through the pages on the topmost box. They weren't crumpled like ordinary waste-paper. Ledger accounts, correspondence files ... letters of nearly current date. Nobody throws out current letters, unless ...

Macy began to fossick through the leaves frantically, trying to find something that made sense to him. No doubt it was all important, too important to be kept, but it meant nothing to him.

He found a pile of writs issued against Libra for debts unpaid, he found a file of letters prevaricating on the issue of payment....

He hadn't the time to look further if he was to find Beech. He left the room regretfully. The sacks would probably have found their way into the incinerator in a few hours.

In the main reception area of the suite was a wide richly carpeted staircase leading upwards, with a series of small Rembrandt pen drawings set in panels at intervals in the walls. He went up.

At the top was another reception space. Nobody about, but the secretary's desk had one or two books and papers on it, and the typewriter cover was off. Several other open-plan spaces adjoined. He walked through. The style up here was entirely

different. Instead of being ultra modern, the furniture was genuine antique. Valuable original paintings by minor Impressionists hung on the walls. The offices were cool, but bright with natural light which reflected mellowly on leather and old panelling.

He heard a sound ... a drawer closing, or a door. A sudden weakness of uncertainty checked him. He was a trespasser—and what would he say to Harry Beech when he saw him? Why see him at all? He ought to mind his own business and go home, a hundred thousand better off.

It wasn't hard to identify Beech's room. It must be at the end of the chandeliered passage that ran like an avenue from the reception area, behind the tall double doors. And that was where the noise came from.

Macy dawdled through the cabinets in an executive room. Nothing much in them except formal books, records and manuals. All the interesting stuff had been cleaned out. He could confront Beech with that. Stupid to try to diagnose the sinking of a ship without seeing the captain....

He pushed a pile of ledgers back and closed the cabinet. He was damn curious anyway ... who was this shadowy presence who masterminded all the deals, who gave an impression that he was there and that you were dealing with him, when you weren't? So many talked as though they knew him, but most had never even met him. There were times when Macy thought he was a mere figurehead, even imaginary....

Steve Macy swung resolutely into the passage and made for the double doors: they were slightly open. He threw them open and walked straight in.

The room was huge and the desk distant. It took a moment to appraise the many shapes that assaulted his eyes, the gilt mirrors and thick Persian rugs. Nobody.

A side door was open. Nobody was there.

The desk was a mess. Papers were scattered on the floor. Old coffee cups and full ashtrays and an overturned waste-basket.

A ribbon of cigar smoke hung in the air. Over the arm of a chair was a fawn sports jacket, and resting on it, a pair of dark glasses.

Macy went out the side door and listened. Somebody was moving about.

'Beech!' he shouted. His voice was hoarse and alarming.

'I want to see you, Beech!'

He moved through the maze of offices as quickly as he could, trying to search systematically and sweep towards the back of the building. He came to the rear fire doors, and they were closed, untouched. He listened.

Nothing.

But what was to stop him waiting in Beech's office? He went back.

The side door was closed, and he'd left it open, he was sure ... He looked round Beech's room for a sign: the jacket and dark glasses were gone.

He ran out of the main doors to the lifts: *3, 2, 1, ground*, the indicator showed.

Steve Macy sped down in the twin lift which had been waiting at top level. The doors opened but the way was blocked by the portly figure of Ernie Tidy.

'Now then, Mr Macy, I thought you went home!'

'Harry Beech? Has he gone?' Macy said, pushing the old man aside and rushing across the marble floor to the entrance.

'No use you rushin' now,' Tidy said, ambling after him; 'Mr Beech come past a couple a minutes ago, goin' like mad as usual. 'E's gone. Drove away in 'is Rolls, 'e did.'

'But why, Steve, *why*?' Linda Hall asked, dropping the highball glass in consternation.

'Because I'm an impulsive guy,' he replied, viewing the shattered pieces on the kitchen floor with equanimity.

'There's no point,' she said, bending to pick up the fragments.

He poured another and dropped some cubes of ice in. 'I've nearly lost my life a couple of times on this job, and I want to *see* the man behind it.'

'I'll show you a photo.'

'You keep one?'

'As a matter of fact, I don't. I simply think it's a silly impulse.'

He sipped a little and warmed towards her. 'Come here, darling,' he said, pulling her to her feet and embracing her, feeling the outline of breasts, belly, thighs against his own through the thin dress ... and the deep warm suction of her lips.

'I want to talk to Beech, Linda. Or at least I want to say something to him, if he won't talk to me——'

'What?'

'I don't know.'

'Emotional indulgence,' she said, tapping his temple with her forefinger.

'I admit it. There is a Harry Beech, or at least I believe there is——'

'Make no mistake about it.'

'So I'm going to confront him. It's like climbing Mt Everest —because it's there.'

'Like Mt Everest, huh?' she said, kissing him.

'Yeah,' he breathed.

'I suppose I'm a sucker for emotional men who have to climb their Mt Everests.'

'That's settled.'

'When are you going?'

'Tomorrow, first flight.'

'Are you sure he's in Majorca?'

'Tidy, the porter fellow who's always hanging round the front of the Libra building, says so. He picked up Harry's tickets from the airline for him.'

'How long will you be there?'

'A day, I expect. Do you know his place?'

'Yes.'

'You've been there?'

'Yes ... don't try to rake up the past, Steve.'

'Where is it?'

'It's a long way from Palma—Alcudia Bay.'

'I'll find it.'

'That's no problem. But he may not see you.'

'I'll chance it.'

'The place is well guarded—Steve, I wish you wouldn't.'

'I'll be back in a couple of days and we'll go straight on to New York together. Right?'

'Right!'

'And we'll see how it is being really together.'

She softened in his arms. 'I've got an idea it's going to be perfect.... You won't do anything more about Libra, will you?'

'Maybe....'

'Steve, quit now. First Bankers want you to quit.'

'They fired me.'

'And they'll get at you if you try to stop them making another deal with Libra.'

'Maybe....'

'Why else would they put that in your letter about the work being confidential?'

'It was a threat.'

'And they have the means to carry it out.'

'You know, Linda, today, after I'd chased Beech downstairs, and missed him, I went back to the Connaught and wrote the last pages of my report and had them typed out by the hotel service.'

'A report on everything you've learned?'

'Nearly a hundred pages.'

'What are you going to do with it?'

'Send it to the people who commissioned it—First Bankers. Keep a copy myself—among my mementos. And the third copy ...'

She was alarmed. 'What are you going to do with the third, Steve?'

'I already have—I posted it to the Department of Industry.'

'Oh, no!'

'The hell with First Bankers!'

'What'll happen?'

He smiled ruefully. 'Nothing!'

'Not at all?'

'It may help, *if* there's a Department of Industry investigation.'

'Surely there'll be an investigation.'

'Not necessarily. There may be a number of little sectional inquiries going on—one by the Stock Exchange, one by the

City Panel, possibly one by the Department of Industry. Everybody will be apologizing to everybody else in case they trespass on territory not their own.'

'They must uncover things.'

'No. The mechanism just isn't there. And the whitewash brushes will be out and going like mad.'

'Why should they be?'

'Because there are too many big financial interests at stake.'

She undid the buttons down the front of her dress. 'Sounds like socialist paranoia to me.'

She was naked underneath.

He put his glass down. 'That's what the honourable gentlemen who run the City say,' he said, drawing her to him and breathing the musky odour of her flesh.

'Right now I have a different psychosis,' he said.

48

Majorca

Steve Macy had coffee on the terrace of a café in the shadow of the old Cathedral. It would be good to stroll around the battlements of the castle and take a glass or two of wine, but his newly hired driver, roasting in the car at the kerb, was squinting irritably in his direction.

He finished the coffee and eased himself into the back seat of the small car.

'Ca'an Picafort okay?' the driver asked.

'Okay,' Macy said, offering him a cigarette.

When they had left the city, the driver drove like a dispatch rider in a military campaign, through all the ruts, swerving and skidding in the dust, always with his foot hard down.

The driver turned round and grinned once at Macy, revealing a huge set of stained teeth. He knew the word: 'Scared? eh?'

'Yeah,' Macy said. 'Take it easy.'

Macy was getting tired of the orange and olive groves and the heat and dust of the car when Ca'an Picafort came into

view. It was a tourist town, sprawling along the main shore of the bay: dozens, perhaps hundreds, of tall hotels, a main street of bars and camera shops, and the rest a clutter of low adobe shelters.

He paid the driver off and booked in at one of the hotels. When he asked the manager where he might find Harry Beech he was surprised to get an immediate response. The manager took him to a balcony overlooking the bay.

'You see, señor, that 'eadland?' he said, pointing across the iridescent green water. 'Zat is where ze very, very rich live. And your Señor Beech ees there too. I know of him. The American. A beeg place he has....'

Macy had a bath and changed his suit for sports trousers and a T shirt. He hired a cab. The cabbie knew too. They drove unhesitatingly past a lot of haciendas and finally stopped well out on the headland beside a high wire fence, topped with strands of barbed wire.

'Zees is it, señor.'

'Are you sure?'

'Señor Beech, ze millionaire?'

'Yes.'

'Zees,' he laughed, jerking his thumb towards the wire. 'I ope ee's expecting you.'

'Why?'

'I teenk Señor Beech don't like vecsitors.'

'Wait here, will you?'

'Oh no, señor. You pay me now.'

Macy complied. 'Will you wait?'

'Sí.'

He got out of the cab and walked along to the gateway. Judging by the fence-line, the property was huge, but you couldn't see what it was like in there because there was a plantation of pines inside, running along the wire.

The gate itself was heavy iron. He could see a drive, bordered with acacias, but the hacienda was out of sight. The gate was locked.

He rang the buzzer.

After an interminable time, a Spaniard sauntered down the drive.

'My name is Steve Macy—you get that?—Steve Macy. I have come from England to see Mr Beech—Señor Beech—on an urgent, personal matter—urgent, you understand?'

The Spaniard listened, half amused, half bored. Then he wandered back up the drive, taking it very slowly in the heat.

Macy shook the gates. The spikes on top were a deterrent. He could probably climb over.... Beech might not even have been told he was here ... the Spaniard might have gone to sleep under a rosebush.

Then a man with close-cropped fair hair came down the drive with two leashed Alsatians.

'What do you want?'

'To see Harry Beech.'

'What about?'

The man's inquiry was merely polite, not in the least defensive, although Macy couldn't discern his exact expression behind the dark glasses.

No point in deception. 'As a matter of fact, I don't have any official reason, or business reason. I've been working with Libra and I wanted to meet the man behind it.'

The dark glasses were examining him. The lenses were coated so there was no indication of the eyes behind.

'Harry Beech doesn't usually see curious people who come knocking at the gate, but since you've come such a long way, you might as well come in.'

The man unlocked the gate and the two dogs sprang forward at Macy, their noses rumpled up to expose their upper fangs.

'Hell!'

'You don't like dogs?'

'I've had a recent nasty experience.'

The man showed no interest. 'These girls are all right,' he said, pulling them back. 'They earn their keep.'

They walked, not up the drive, but across a well-watered lawn of fine grass, filled with carefully tended shrubs and flower beds.

'You like the gardens?'

'Sure, but I can't understand why anyone would want to lock himself up behind a ten-foot fence topped with barbed wire in a foreign land.'

'You make it sound like prison.'

'I suppose it is....'

'Perhaps Harry will put you right, Mr Macy. In order to have perfect freedom you have to control your environment, you have to keep curious people out with high fences.'

They had climbed to high ground. The low red-tiled roof and cream washed stone of a house was apparent over the rise.

'The hacienda is set at the highest point for view and a breeze.'

Macy could see now, all round him, the lawns and plantations of the estate. 'Nice little place,' he said.

'It's a kind of perfection. Harry likes that.'

'Pity he didn't achieve it in his business operations.'

'He's not so conceited as to think he can achieve it in all directions.'

They could see across the bay now. Macy shielded his eyes against the glare. The Spaniard came towards them and took the dogs without a word. They descended a path round the house, to a patio.

The path ran on down the hillside to a private jetty.

'Do you like her?' the fair-haired man said as they turned on to the patio.

A forty-foot white cabin cruiser swayed at the jetty, and beside her a high-bowed speedboat with a polished wood finish.

'Which one?'

'The ski boat of course. She's a jet. Twin Chrysler marine. Do you know the type?'

'I've had experiences with a roughly similar sort of boat.'

'Really? What make?'

'I didn't get a chance to look.'

The question was merely polite. The dark glasses were fixed on the craft.

'Superb, she is: sixty miles an hour, you know. That's fast on water. Turn her on a dollar. Perhaps we'll take a ride later.'

The patio was covered with climbing flowers and in the shadow at the far end were deck-chairs and tables. It took a moment for Macy to accustom himself to the shade.

A dark-haired, long-bodied girl was reclining there, reading

a magazine. She pushed her dark glasses up on to the full pile of hair.

'Hullo, Steve.'

'Hi,' he replied, poker faced.

'You know Miranda?'

'We met,' he replied, 'at——'

'At the Cassandra Club,' Miranda said, closing the subject.

'Are you here for—for long ...?'

'For as long as Harry wants me,' she said.

'When am I gonna get to meet Harry?'

Miranda shrieked.

'Noisy girl,' the man said.

'Darling!' she said. 'Don't play with Steve!'

The man took off his glasses. So it was Beech. He'd suspected, but the informality had fooled him ... a personal assistant, private secretary or something like that, he'd thought. He'd half expected to find Harry Beech enthroned in gold, sitting beside a jewelled altar....

'Can I get you a drink, Mr Macy? A long gin and squash, I recommend it,' Beech said, snapping his fingers at a servant.

Harry Beech was in his late thirties, but he might have been in his late twenties. His hair was golden and thick. He was of medium height and build, although the shoulders were well developed. No fat. He looked like a very young man, tanned, in a pair of bathing trunks with a thin yellow shirt on.

There was something haggard in all the newspaper photographs Steve Macy had seen, but that wasn't apparent. His complexion was reddened by the sun. The eyes were small, blue and deep. He was almost unlined.

Steve Macy accepted the tall glass from the tray and gulped down half of the delicious liquid.

'Aren't you having one?'

'I seldom drink liquor, Mr Macy. Wine, yes. I have a superb cellar here ... perhaps you would like to see it?'

'I don't know anything about wine, except I like it.'

'Same as me!' Miranda giggled.

Beech's voice had been soft, a mid-Atlantic drawl, neither exactly American or English. Now it was firmer: 'Of course I know of you, Mr Macy.'

'I thought you might.'

'I'm pleased to meet you. You're an intelligent and persistent man.'

'I've caused you some trouble, I think.'

'I wouldn't put too much weight on your intervention.'

'You mean Libra would have fallen of its own weight?'

'Not necessarily ... there are complex forces at work,' Beech said airily.

'I've reported what I know to the authorities in England—about the fictitious assets, the planes in Hong Kong.'

'Have you? Yes, I know what you mean, but you're quite wrong about them being fictitious. I believe there's swarms of mechanics round them, all the time, tightening up bolts and nuts, you know ...?'

'You've covered it up?'

'Nothing to cover.'

Harry Beech went over to Miranda and ruffled her hair.

'Don't look so sour, Mr Macy. You've done a very good job, and it's not our fault if we're not as bad as you'd like us to be.'

'There'll be an investigation.'

'I hope so.'

'Why?'

'To show that what happened wasn't my fault.'

'Not *your fault*?'

'It wasn't his fault, Steve.'

Beech waved her to silence.

'Mr Macy, I started out in business in my twenties without a dime. I built up a little travel business round some of the New York hotels. I used to grab tourists by the lapels in hotel lobbies and sell them tours. I bought my own bus. Then I bought another. And another. One day I chartered a plane. Along comes a guy named Philip Challis. "You want more money to expand?" "Sure," I say. "I'd like to open another shop." "Why don't you buy a whole fleet of buses?" he says. "And why not a plane or two?" "Okay," I say. I'm working hard. Like a horse. Then somebody says, "Harry, you're going to turn over a million." Then somebody says, "Harry, do you know you're worth a million?" I don't know, I don't know very much at all. I'm surrounded by people who seem to know

everything. Libra swells up like a balloon, but always people are saying to me, "Harry, we need more cash." Cash. We take over this, then we take over that. Growth is the only answer ... you see, Mr Macy, I'm a very good travel agent, locked up in a boardroom with a lot of accountants. They pushed me over the edge when I wasn't any more use ... but it's only a temporary setback. I'll be back there....'

'I doubt it.'

'He will!' Miranda said.

'I haven't done any harm. I've given thousands of people jobs——'

'And lost them.'

'But I created those jobs, Mr Macy,' Beech said triumphantly. 'I created them out of nothing. Nothing was there before!'

'You're a real creator....'

Beech's small eyes raked Macy in high seriousness.

'I've enriched thousands,' he said. 'Even you, I believe, at one time, took your bread from my hand.'

'I did.'

Then Beech changed and the hardness went out of him. 'Don't cry, Mr Macy. Remember I just lost over fifty million.'

'You have plenty left, Harry,' Miranda said.

'I surely do, sweetheart.'

Macy tossed off the rest of the gin and stood up. 'I gotta be going.'

'Don't go yet, Mr Macy. Come out in the boat.'

'Yes, Steve.'

'Let's take a quick flip round the bay, Mr Macy, and I'll show you her paces. Then we'll come back and have supper. Okay, Miranda?'

'Super.'

'I've found out what I came for. I've got to go,' Macy insisted.

'I don't get it,' Miranda said. 'You came all this way just to have a drink and say good afternoon?'

'Mr Macy came, Miranda, for a reason you wouldn't understand.'

'Can your man let me out? And hold the dogs?'

'You must go in my car,' Beech said, turning to the servant

who waited unobtrusively by the house door. He spoke briefly in Spanish.

'I've ordered the car out.'

'I have a cab waiting on the road.'

'I'll take care of it,' Beech said. 'You'll find my car a little better I think.'

'I have no doubt, but I don't want to ride in your car—any more than I want to ride in your speedboat.'

Beech was affable. 'Isn't that a little silly?'

'I'd sooner walk.'

Beech stood up and signalled the Spanish gardener with the dogs.

'He'll show you out,' Beech said.

'So long, Miranda,' Macy said.

Miranda crossed her long brown thighs and flicked open the magazine. 'Beats me!' she said.

Macy walked up the path to join the gardener. The dogs leaped at him, straining on their leads.

'Oh, Mr Macy,' Beech said after him, 'wasn't it inconsistent, in the circumstances, to have that drink?'

He turned to see Beech standing lower down the path looking quizzically at him with those deep-set blue eyes: a harmless young sportsman.

He was amused in spite of himself.

'I'm an incurable alcoholic,' he said, and walked on.

As he went out the gate he saw a driver taking a Cadillac back up the drive. But the cab had gone. The road was empty.

Steve Macy walked back to town. It was a long way. The roads were tree-lined and coloured occasionally with red and white flowers. He passed a half-built marina and countless half built hotels. As he skirted the bay by the beach road he could see a big speedboat cavorting round the other yachts and launches, sending up geysers of spray. He could see the driver's yellow shirt, and the long, flowing dark hair of a girl.

When he reached the hotel, he arranged a car back to Palma, and a flight to London. He decided to telephone his daughter in New York.

He waited for the call on the beach, in the warm fresh air, until the desk clerk called him inside.

'I'm on a Spanish island, Christine—I'll be home the day after tomorrow.'

'Is there any treasure there, Daddy?'

'None.'

'Where are all the baddies?'

She had the knack of finding a difficult question. 'Still around, darling.'

'Aren't they even hiding?'

'Nope!'

'Will you catch them, then?'

'I don't think so, Chris.'

'Ummm . . .' the child replied, pausing to think it over.

KENNETH ROYCE

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